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JANUARY 2009

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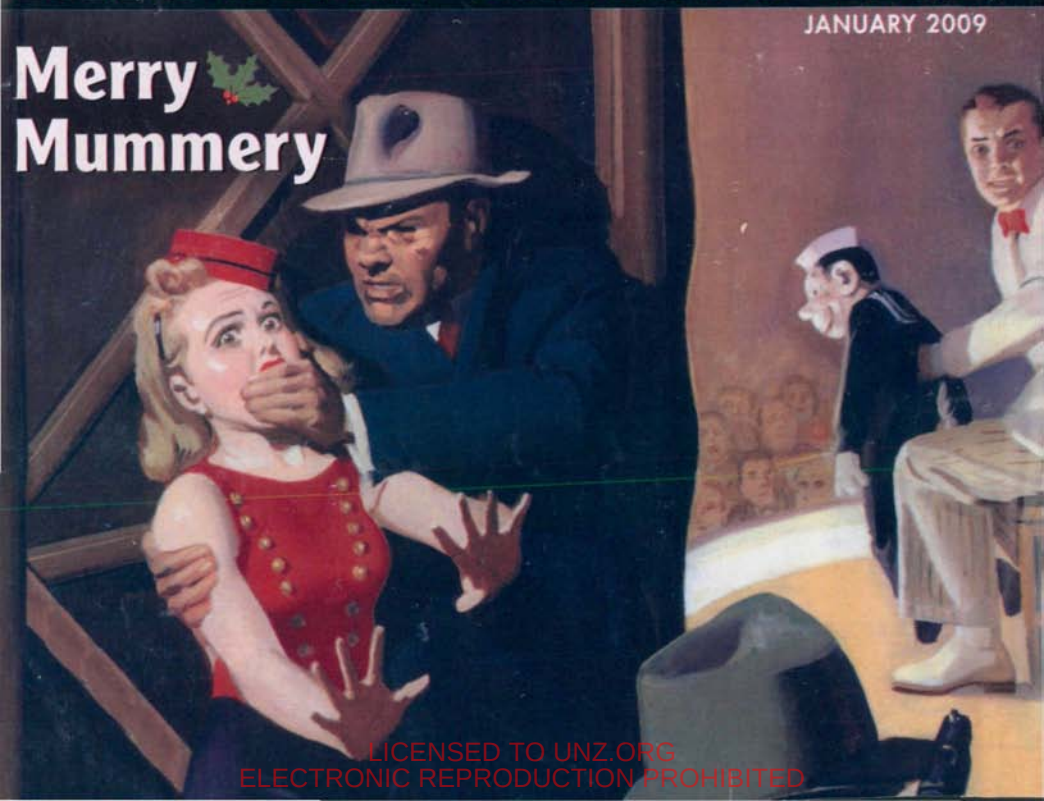

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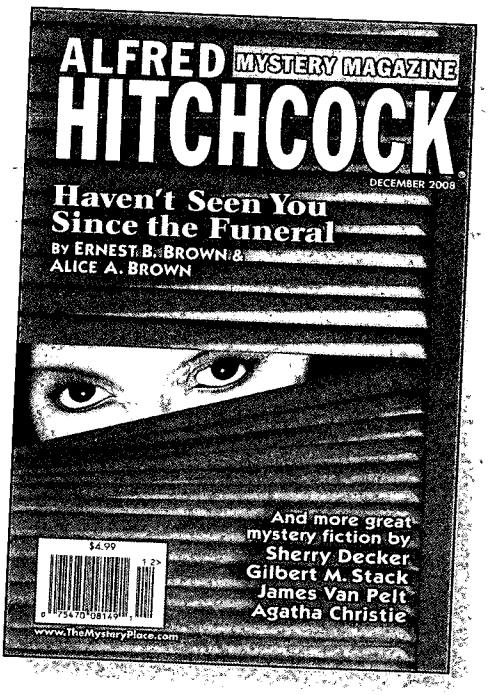

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CONTENTS
JANUARY 2009

FICTION

The Killer Christian
BY ANDREW KLAVAN 2

Prisoner in Paradise
BY DENNIS RICHARD MURPHY 19

Mouse
BY CAROLINE BENTON 30

Slow Burn
BY SIMON BRETT 43

Hardboiled
BY TIM MALEENY 59

An Early Christmas
BY DOUG ALLYN 71

The Lover and Lever Society
BY ROBERT BARNARD 96

The Christmas Egg
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 104

PASSPORT TO CRIME

O Christmas Tree
BY SUSANNE MISCHKE 14

BLACK MASK

That Kind of Guy
BY GARY CAHILL 52

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

Snow Blanket
BY EILEEN ANDERSON 62

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 12

Blog Bytes BY BILL CRIDER 112

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Killer Christian

by Andrew Klavan

A certain portion of my misspent youth was misspent in the profession of journalism. I'm not proud of it, but a man has to make a living and there it is. And, in fact, I learned a great many things working as a reporter. Most importantly, I learned how to be painstakingly honest and lie at the same time. That's how the news business works. It's not that anyone goes around making up facts or anything—not on a regular basis, anyway. No, most of the time, newspeople simply learn how to pick and choose which facts to tell, which will heighten your sense that their gormless opinions are reality or at least delay your discovery that everything they believe is provably false. If ever you see a man put his fingers in his ears and whistle Dixie to keep from hearing the truth, you may assume he's a fool, but if he puts his fingers in *your* ears and starts whistling, then you know you are dealing with a journalist.

As an example of what I mean, consider the famous shootout above the Mysterious Bookshop in the downtown section of Manhattan known as Tribeca. Because of the drama of the violence, the personalities involved, and the high-level arrests that followed, the newspaper and television coverage of the incident ran for weeks on end. Every crime expert in the country seems to have had his moment on the talk shows. Two separate nonfiction books were written about it, not to mention the one novel. And along with several movies and TV shows featuring gunfights reminiscent of the actual event,

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there was a docudrama scripted by a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaperman who covered the story, though it was never released theatrically and went straight to DVD.

There was all that—and no one got the story right. Oh, they got some of the facts down well enough, but the truth? So help me, they did not come nigh it. Why? Because they were journalists—and because the truth offended their sensibilities and contradicted their notions of what the world is like.

So they talked about how La Cosa Nostra had been hobbled by the trials of the 'eighties and 'nineties and how new gangs were moving in to divide the spoils left behind. They focused on what they called Sarkesian's "betrayal" of Picarone and speculated about the underworld's realigning loyalties and racial tensions. They even unearthed some evidence for a sort of professional rivalry between Sarkesian and the man known as "The Death."

Hailed by Stephen King as "the most original American novelist of crime and suspense since Cornell Woolrich," Andrew Klavan has written many notable thrillers, including *Don't Say a Word,* which was turned into a 2001 film starring Michael Douglas. His latest novel, *Empire of Lies* (Harcourt, July 2008), follows a man who risks his life to stop a terrorist plot. The author originally produced the following for limited distribution as a holiday gift for customers of New York's Mysterious Bookshop. ¶

But the truth is, from the very start, this was really a story about faith and redemption—quite a mysterious story too, by the end of it. And that was too much for them—the journalists. They could not—they would not—see it that way. And because they couldn't see it, they put forward the facts in such a fashion as to insure that you would fail to see it too.

It falls upon me, then, to tell it as it actually happened.

Sarkesian, to begin with, was a Christian, a Catholic, very devout. He took communion as often as he could, daily when he could, and went to confession no less frequently than once a week. What he said in those confessions of course I wouldn't know, but it must've been pretty interesting because, along with being a Christian, Sarkesian was also an enforcer—a killer when he had to be—for Raymond Picarone. How Sarkesian reconciled these two facets of his life can be explained simply enough: He was stupid. Some people just are—a lot of people are, if you ask me—and he was one of them: dumb as dirt.

So on a given day, Sarkesian might kneel before the Prince of Peace asking that he be forgiven as he himself forgave; he might listen attentively to a sermon about charity and compassion; lift his eyes with childlike expectation to the priest who handed him the body of his Lord—and then toodle off to smash his knuckles into the mouth of one of Picarone's debtors until the man's teeth went pitter-pattering across the floor like a handful of pebbles. Virtually every journalist who reported the story discounted the sincerity of Sarkesian's beliefs because of the nature of his actions, but they were mistaken in this. Indeed, if it seems strange to you that a man might hold his faith in one part of his mind and his deeds in another and never fully examine the latter in the light of the former . . . well, congratulations, you may be qualified to become a journalist yourself.

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No, Sarkesian prayed with a committed heart and did his job with a committed heart, and that his job included murder everyone who knew him knew. That he did that murder efficiently and without apparent compunction made him much feared by his employer's enemies. It also made him much appreciated by his employer.

"Sarkesian," Raymond Picarone used to say with an approving smile, "is not the sharpest razor in the barbershop, but when you tell him you need the thing done, it gets done."

Now it happened one day that the thing Picarone needed done was the killing of a young man named Steven Bean. Bean was a minor functionary in Picarone's organization and a sleazy weasel of a boy even for that company. For the third time in six months, Picarone had caught Bean skimming from his profits. He had decided to make an example of him.

So he summoned Sarkesian to his gentlemen's club on West 45th Street by the river and he said to him, "Sarkesian . . . Stevie B . . . it's no good . . . we have to make, you know, a new arrangement." Picarone had taken to talking in this elliptical fashion in order to baffle any law-enforcement personnel who might be eavesdropping electronically on his conversations.

Unfortunately Sarkesian, being not very intelligent, as I said, was frequently also baffled. "Arrangement," he said slowly, chewing on the word as if it were a solid mass and blinking his heavily lidded eyes.

"Yeah," said Picarone impatiently. "Bean and us . . . I think we're done . . . you see what I'm saying? It's no good . . . we've come to a parting of the ways."

Sarkesian blinked again and licked his thick lips uncertainly.

"Kill him!" said Picarone. "Would you just kill him? Christ, what an idiot."

Sarkesian brightened, delighted to understand what was expected of him, and set off on his way.

It was mid December and the city was done up for Christmas. The great snowflake was hung over Fifth Avenue and 57th Street and the great tree was sparkling by the skating rink just downtown. Gigantic ribbons decorated the sides of some buildings. Sprays of colored lights bedecked the fronts of others. And early flurries of snow had been blowing in from the north all week, enough to give the streets a festive wintry air but not so much as to be a pain in the neck and tie up traffic.

So when Steven Bean awoke one early evening in his cramped studio apartment on the Upper West Side, he staggered to the window and looked out at a cheery Yuletide scene. There was snow in the air and there were lights in the windows of the brownstones across the way. There were green wreaths on the doors and the sound of a tinkling bell drifting from where Santa Claus was standing on the corner.

Unfortunately, there was also Sarkesian, trudging over the sidewalk on his way to kill him.

Steven had full awareness of his guilt, as do we all, though he'd managed to push that awareness to one side of his consciousness, as likewise do we all. But seeing Sarkesian plodding along with his great shoulders hunched and his big, murdering hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his overcoat, the guilt awareness snapped back front and center and Steven understood exactly what the killer was here for.

He leapt off the sofa and jammed his scrawny legs into his jeans, his scrawny

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feet into his sneakers. He already had a sweatshirt on and was pulling a blue ski jacket over it as he rushed out of the apartment. He could hear the front door closing three floors below as he raced up the stairs. He could hear Sarkesian's heavy footsteps rising toward him as he reached the next landing. There was a ladder there leading up to a trapdoor. Steven climbed quickly and pushed through the trap and up to the roof.

Here, the white sky opened above him and the swirling flakes fell cold upon his face. Steven dashed through the chill air, across the shadow of the water tower. He reached the parapet at the roof's edge and leapt over it, flying across a narrow airshaft to land on the roof of the building next-door. From there, he found his way to another trap, down another ladder, to the stairs of the neighboring building. In moments, he was on the street, running along the damp-darkened pavement, dodging the homecoming pedestrians. The streetlamps were just coming on above him as he passed, making the falling snow glisten against the night.

At first, as he ran, he asked himself where he would go, but it was really a rhetorical question. There was only one place he could go: to the downtown theater where he knew he would find his younger sister.

Hailey Bean was in her mid twenties, and was just beginning to realize she was not going to be a successful actress. She was a sweet girl, kind and gentle and loving; practical, down-to-earth, and sane. Which is to say she was completely unsuited for a life in show business.

At the moment, however, she was rehearsing a very small part in a once-popular drama that was to be revived off-off—not to mention off—Broadway. Hailey's role was that of an angel. At the end of the first act, she was to be lowered toward the stage in a harness-and-wire contraption. Hanging in midair, she would then deliver words of prophecy as the first-act curtain fell. It was only a 45-second scene—with another scene about the same length in the second act—but it was pivotal. An elaborately beautiful costume—a white robe with gold trimming and two enormous feathery wings—had been designed to make Hailey's attractive but not very imposing figure more impressive, and electronic enhancements and echoes were going to be added to her pleasing but less than awe-inspiring voice.

She was in the back of the small theater discussing these embellishments with the stage manager when Steven Bean burst through a rear door. Trying to keep a low profile, he planted himself in a dark corner—where he proceeded to make himself ridiculously conspicuous by gaping and whispering and waving frantically in an attempt to get his sister's attention.

The differences in character between Hailey and her brother can probably be at least partially explained by the fact that they were, in fact, only half-siblings. Steven had endured his parents' vituperative divorce, whereas Hailey had grown up in their mother's second, more stable and loving household. Hailey was aware of her advantages and she felt compassion for her brother. But she also knew he was corrupt and reckless and dangerous, incapable of feeling anything more for her than a sort of puling, hissing envy and a fear of her decency which could shade over into hatred whenever she refused to give him whatever it was he was trying to get out of her at the time.

Still, he was family. So, as soon as she politely could, she excused herself to the stage manager and went over to see what he wanted now.

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"He's after me," were the first words he gasped at her.

"Calm down." Hailey touched his arm gently. "Who's after you?"

"Sarkesian. He's coming to kill me."

The sister caught her breath and straightened. She didn't bother with any expressions of disbelief. She believed him well enough. "What do you want me to do?"

"Hide me!" Steven whined.

"Steven, where can I hide you? My apartment is the first place he'll look."

"You must have friends!"

"Oh, Steven, I can't send you to my friends with some thug coming after you."

"Well, give me some money at least so I can get away!"

"I don't have any more money."

"I'm your brother and I'm going to be murdered in cold blood and everything's fine for you and you won't do anything for me," Steven said.

Hailey sighed. She knew he was just trying to make her feel guilty but it didn't matter that she knew: She felt guilty anyway. Especially because, as she was forced to admit to herself, she wasn't being completely honest with him about the money.

Hailey was a clerk during the day at the Mysterious Bookshop, a store specializing in crime fiction, located downtown on Warren Street. Because Hailey was pretty and efficient and meltingly feminine, she had become a favorite of the avuncular gentleman who ran the place. Sympathetic to her situation, he'd supplied her with an apartment in the brownstone over the shop and so her rent and expenses were fairly cheap. Thus, while it was true that Steven had all but cleaned out her savings six months ago when he'd gotten himself in trouble with Picarone's bookies, Hailey, by working overtime and scrimping on luxuries, had actually managed to save up a little more since then. The trouble was, she had a strong feeling she was going to need that money pretty soon. In a sort of semi-subconscious way, she had begun making plans to give up her acting career and go back to school.

She hesitated another few seconds, but she couldn't stand up to Steven's terrified eyes and his accusatory wheedling and her own guilt. Finally she said, "All right. I can't leave now. But come back at nine when the rehearsal is over and we'll go to the bank and I'll give you whatever I have."

Steven whined and pleaded a little more, hoping to convince her to go with him right away or even to let him use her bank card, but she stood firm and at last he slunk back out into the snow.

On some other evening, he might well have persuaded her to come with him. But as it happened, this was the night of a special technical rehearsal dedicated almost entirely to her character. An hour after their conversation, Hailey was dressed in her winged robe of white and gold, trussed up in her harness and dangling in midair about ten feet off the stage.

She was alone. The other actors had gone home for the night. Only the director and the stage manager were left, and they were shut away in the booth at the back of the balcony. They had finished perfecting the echo effect for Hailey's voice and were now discussing their various lighting options, but where Hailey was, their conversation was inaudible. The theater was silent around her. For long periods, it was dark as well. Then, every so often, a spotlight would appear and catch Hailey dangling there in her magnificent winged costume. It would

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hold her in its glow for a moment as the director judged the effectiveness of the light's color and intensity. Then it would go off again as he and the technician fell to discussing their options once more.

For Hailey, it was a boring process. And since the harness dug into the flesh under her arms, it was kind of uncomfortable, too. To distract herself, she tried going over her part in her mind but as she only had four lines, her thoughts soon began to wander. She thought about Steven, of course, about the danger he was in and the troubles he had had as a child and the sad mess he had made of his adulthood. She thought about the money she was going to give him and how hard she had worked to save it and how long it would take her to save some more. She fretted that she would never find a way to improve her life. Ironically, if she could have peered only a little more than a decade into the future, she would've seen herself the mistress of a large house in the northwestern corner of Connecticut, the cheerful mother of no less than five children and the wife of a man who felt more love and gratitude to her than I can rightly say. But for the present, all this lay obscured within the mists of time, and she hung in the darkness anxious and troubled.

Then, as she hung, she saw a pale slanting beam of light fall at the head of one of the theater's aisles. Someone—a man—had opened the door from the foyer. Now his enormous shadow fell into the light and now he himself was there. He came forward a few steps, but as the foyer door swung shut behind him, the theater was plunged into a nearly impenetrable blackness, and he paused uncertainly.

Hailey felt her pulse speed up. She had caught a glimpse of the man as he entered and there was no doubt in her mind who he was. A hoodlum that size with a face that low—surely, this was the very Sarkesian her brother had told her about, the one who was coming to kill him.

Hailey dangled in the air and watched as the man began slowly advancing again down the aisle, hunting, no doubt, for Steven. She held her breath. Her heart pounded against her chest. The killer came nearly to the foot of the stage. He stopped almost directly beneath her. Sarkesian took a long slow look from one side of the proscenium to the other. Hailey shuddered with fear that he would now lift his eyes and see her.

And then the spotlight came on.

Suddenly, to Hailey's horror, she was fully exposed, hanging there helpless and ridiculous in her white and golden robe with the feathery wings outstretched on either side of her.

Sarkesian looked up—and Hailey was surprised to see he seemed even more horrified than she was. He cried out. He threw his scaly, ham-sized hands up beside his face. He leaned back as if afraid Hailey would strike him down on the spot. Frozen there, trembling, he stared up at her with a mixture of terror and awe.

Hailey understood at once what had happened—understood what Sarkesian must've thought she was, and understood too the incredible piety and even more incredible stupidity of a man capable of believing such a thing. Acting almost as quickly as she thought, she stretched out her arm and pointed her finger at him sternly.

"Sarkesian!" she thundered—and the echo effect, which the director had left on for further testing, magnified her voice so that it vibrated from floor to rafters. "Sarkesian—repent!"

At that, as if the timing had been arranged by a power higher even than the

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director, the spotlight went out again.

Hailey couldn't see what happened next. The light had temporarily blinded her. But she heard Sarkesian send up a high-pitched wail—and the next instant, she could hear his enormous body fumbling and bumping into seats as he made his panicked way back up the aisle.

The door at the rear of the theater flew open. Sarkesian's massive silhouette filled the lighted frame. Then he was gone. There was the light alone. The door swung shut. There was darkness.

Sarkesian didn't look back. He didn't even look to left or right. He ran out of the theater and into the street and was nearly struck down by an oncoming taxi. He found himself bent over the cab's hood, both hands braced against the wet metal as he gaped through the windshield at the frightened driver. Waving his arm wildly to make the cabbie stay, he rushed around to the car's side door and tumbled into the backseat. He gasped out his address to the driver. He sat huddled in a corner, shivering and whimpering, all the way home.

Now, all right, you may laugh at Sarkesian. But even outside of journalism, truth and fiction are sometimes impossibly intertwined. A figment of imagination, a myth, even a fraud may lead us to powerful revelations. Come to think of it, do we ever find revelations in any other way? If Sarkesian was fooled by Hailey's quick-witted improvisation, if it caused him to stagger into his apartment and fall to his knees, if it made him pray and weep in the searing realization that he had lived a life of wretched wickedness in complete contravention to the commandments of his God—was that realization any less true for the way it came to him?

In any case, the fact is: He remained on his knees all night long. And when the gray day dawned, he knew exactly what he had to do.

He went to see Picarone. He found his boss eating breakfast with his wife on the terrace of their penthouse. The presence of the glamorous and somewhat regal Mrs. P. cowed Sarkesian and he spoke with his chin on his chest, gazing down at his own titanic feet.

"I can't do that thing we talked about," he said in his slow, dull voice. "I can't do any of that anymore. The bad stuff. I gotta do, I don't know, good stuff now, from now on. Like the Bible says."

"O-o-oh," said Picarone, lifting his chin. "Yeah. The Bible. Sure. Sure, Sarkesian, I get it. We'll only give you the good stuff from now on. Like the Bible says, sure."

It was touching, Mrs. Picarone later told her friends, to see Sarkesian's great, granite face wreathed in childlike smiles as he floated dreamily out of the room.

When he was gone, Picarone picked up the phone. "Hey," he said, "I need you to take care of a little weasel named Steven Bean for me. And while you're at it, you can do me Sarkesian too."

The call had gone out to a man named Billy Shine. He was known to all who feared him as "The Death." There was no one who didn't fear him. He was a lean, sinewy man with a long ratlike face. He moved like smoke and half the terror he inspired was due to the way he could appear beside you suddenly, as if out of thin air. He could find anyone anywhere and reach them no matter what. And when he did find them, when he did reach them, they were shortly thereafter dead.

Sarkesian would never have seen him coming. But he was tipped off—warned that The Death was on his trail. Mrs. Picarone had been sincere when she told her friends she'd been moved by Sarkesian's simple faith. She was, in fact, a regular churchgoer herself. Sometimes, she lay awake in a cold sweat, painfully

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aware of the contrast between the dictates of her religion and the source of her wealth. Normally, a quarter of an hour spent running her fingers over the contents of her jewelry box soothed her until she could sleep again. But that night, somehow, this was not enough. Exhausted, she made a stealthy phone call to a manicurist with whom Sarkesian sometimes shared a bed.

Steven Bean, meanwhile, was sleeping just fine, curled up on the sofa in his apartment. I know: You'd think he'd be just about anywhere else, *doing* anything else. But after scrounging money from his sister to fund his escape, he had hit on the brilliant idea of increasing the stash by joining a 24-hour poker game he knew of. By the time he wandered out into the streets the next evening, he was all but broke again—and so tired that he convinced himself it would surely be safe at his apartment by now. Sarkesian had probably only been sent to scare him, anyway. He might even have been in the neighborhood to see someone else. Maybe it was Steven's own guilty conscience that had made him jump to conclusions and panic when he saw the killer approaching. What he really needed, he thought, was to be home and snug on his own little sofa. And so that's where he went and, after a few more drinks and a joint or two, he was out like a light.

It's amazing people do these things, but they do. It's amazing what a little distance there needs to be between our actions and their consequences before the consequences seem to us to disappear entirely. One A.M. rolled around and there was Steven, snoring away with his hands tucked under his head, so deeply unconscious that even the entry buzzer couldn't wake him.

But the door woke him when it crashed open, when its wooden frame splintered and fragments of it went flying across the room. That made him sit bolt upright, his jaw dangling, his eyes spiraling crazily. Before he could speak—before he could even think—someone grabbed him by the shirtfront.

It was Sarkesian.

"The Death is coming," the big man said. "Get up. Let's go."

What had happened: Sarkesian had become a new man since his encounter with the "Angel of the Lord" and he was determined to stay that way. After getting the warning call from the manicurist, he understood that it was not enough just to save himself. Knowing that The Death would come after Steven first, he saw he was responsible for protecting him as well. A sterner moralist than I am might wonder why he didn't call the police. But others had called the police in an attempt to avoid The Death and they were dead. No, Sarkesian knew Steven's safety was in his own hands. So here he was, shaking him awake

At the first mention of The Death's terrible name, whatever was left of Steven's drunken complacency vanished like an ace of spades at a magician's fingersnap. He didn't know why Sarkesian had come to help him. At the moment, he hardly knew where he was. But he did understand that he had to run—and that there was nowhere to run from the likes of Billy Shine.

Sarkesian didn't wait for him to figure this out or for anything. He grabbed him by the arm, got him dressed, and dragged him out the door. They were halfway down the second flight of stairs, Sarkesian in the lead, before he spoke again.

"Where can you go?" he asked Steven over his shoulder.

And Steven, still stupid with sleep, gave the only answer he could think of. "Tribeca. Above the bookshop. My sister's there."

They took three cabs to avoid being followed. They traveled the last few blocks on foot. Soon they were running together through the severe, slanting shadows

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falling across the downtown boulevard from the line of brownstone buildings to their right. Tinsel and colored Christmas lights hung from the windows above them. And snow fell, a thin layer of it muffling their footsteps as they ran.

As they approached the Mysterious Bookshop itself, they saw warm yellow light spilling through its storefront to lay in an oblong pool on the snowy sidewalk. Shadows moved behind the storefront's display of brightly jacketed books. Murmuring voices and laughter trailed out from within and a Christmas carol was playing—"O Holy Night."

With a silent curse, Sarkesian understood: There was a Christmas party going on inside.

A moment later, the voices and music grew louder. The bookshop door was coming open. A man and woman were leaving the party, waving over their shoulders as they stepped laughing into the night.

Suddenly Steven found himself shoved hard into an alcove, Sarkesian's massive body pressed against him, pinning him, hiding him. They huddled there together, still, as the couple walked away from them toward West Broadway.

When Sarkesian's body relaxed, Steven was able to move his arm, to lift his finger to point out his sister's name above a mailbox in the alcove. Sarkesian nodded. But Steven didn't press the buzzer button below Hailey's name. He was afraid she would turn them away. Instead, he went to work on the lock of the outside door. His fingers were trembling with cold and fear, but it wasn't much of a lock to speak of. In a second or two, he had worked it and they were inside.

The talk and music from the bookshop were still audible through the walls. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" followed them up the stairway as Sarkesian and Steven raced to the fourth-floor landing. They made their way down the long hallway to the last door. Steven pounded on it with his fist. He shouted, "Hailey! It's me! Open up!"

There was a pause. Steven was gripped by the fear that Hailey herself might be at the party in the bookshop downstairs. But then, her sleepy voice came muffled from within, "Steven?"

"Hailey, please! It's life or death!"

There was the sound of a chain sliding back. The door started to open . . .

And at that moment, Sarkesian, waiting at Steven's side, felt a chill on his neck and looked to his left.

There was The Death standing at the other end of the hall.

He had materialized there in his trademark fashion, without warning, silent as smoke. Now, like smoke, he began drifting toward them.

Sarkesian reacted quickly. With one hand, he shoved Steven in the back, pushing him through Hailey's door. With the other, he drew his gun.

The Death also had a gun. He was lifting it, pointing it at Sarkesian.

"Don't you do it, Billy Shine!" Sarkesian shouted.

He heard a loud *clap*: The terrified Steven had shut Hailey's door, hoping Sarkesian would kill The Death while he cowered inside. But that changed nothing for Sarkesian. He was already moving down the hall toward Shine.

The two killers walked toward each other, their guns upraised. They were fifty yards apart, then forty, then thirty-five. Sarkesian called out again: "Don't do it!" The Death answered him with a gunshot. Sarkesian fired back. The men began pulling the triggers of their guns again and again in rapid succession. One blast blended with another, deafening in the narrow corridor. The two kept firing and

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walking toward each other as steadily as if hot metal were not ripping into them, were not tearing their insides apart.

At last, their bullets were exhausted. Each heard the snap of an empty chamber. They stopped where they were, not ten yards between them. Shine lowered his arm and Sarkesian lowered his. Shine smiled. Then he pitched forward to the floor and The Death lay dead at Sarkesian's feet.

Sarkesian barely looked at him. He simply started walking again, stepping over the body without a pause. He let the gun slip from his fingers. It fell with a thud to the hall carpet. Only when he reached the stairway did he stagger for a moment. He held onto the banister until he was steady again. Then he started down the stairs.

All this time, no one on the fourth floor had ventured out of his apartment. People heard the gunfire. They guessed what it was. They called the police and just hunkered down. But on the floors below there were doors opening, faces peeking out. The sound of choral music from the bookshop grew louder: "Silent Night."

As the moments passed with no more shots, people on the fourth floor looked out too. Hailey looked out and Steven peeked over her shoulder, hiding behind her.

"Yes!" he said, pumping his fist when he saw that The Death had fallen.

But Hailey said, "What happened to Sarkesian?"

Steven had told her in a single sentence about his rescue. She had guessed the rest, guessed what had happened to Sarkesian as a result of their encounter in the theater. Tender soul that she was, she felt bad for the thug. She felt any injuries he might have suffered were in part her responsibility.

She came out of her apartment into the hall.

"Sis! Sis!" Steven hissed after her, frantically waving her back.

But she kept moving forward cautiously until she reached the stairway. She saw the trail of blood on the risers. With a soft cry of distress, she started down the stairs.

She found Sarkesian lying on his back in front of the building, his blood running out into the snow. The partygoers in the Mysterious Bookshop had poured out of the store to investigate the noise and now stood gathered around him. The sound of sirens was growing louder as the police drew near. The bookshop door was propped open. "Silent Night" drifted out into the air.

No one came near Sarkesian. He lay alone in the center of the crowd. He blinked up at the falling snow, his breathing labored.

Then Hailey came toward him, her long white flannel nightgown trailing behind her. Many people saw and heard what happened next. Many of them talked about it to the journalists who soon flooded the scene. And yet it was never reported in a single newspaper, never mentioned on radio or television even once. This is the first time it's ever been told.

Hailey knelt down in the snow beside Sarkesian. She leaned over him. He stirred, turning his eyes toward her. He tried to speak. He couldn't. He licked his lips and tried again.

"I see . . ." he whispered hoarsely. "I see an angel."

"Oh, Sarkesian," said Hailey miserably. "I'm really not."

Sarkesian blinked slowly and shook his head. "No," he whispered. "There." And with a terrible effort, he lifted his enormous hand and pointed over her shoulder at the sky.

Then his hand dropped back into the snow and he was dead.●

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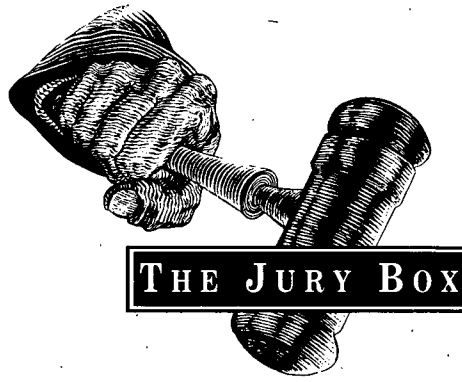

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

Looking for holiday gifts for a mystery buff? Several new books with Yuletide content are followed by some out-of-the-way items the reader on your list may not be aware of.

**** Peter Lovesey: *Murder on the Short List,* Crippen & Landru, $17 trade paper, $43 signed hardcover. Two stories fit our holiday theme: "Bertie and the Christmas Tree," from the very funny series narrated by the sleuthing-wannabe Prince of Wales, later Edward VII; and "The Case of the Dead Wait," combining mince pies, strolling carolers, and an alleged Wiltshire holiday tradition into a deftly constructed and generously clued whodunit for TV landscaping sleuths Rosemary and Thyme. Sgt. Cribb and Constable Thackeray also appear, but the prize of the collection may be "Second Strings," a comic crook story about the theft of a harp that is a masterpiece of misdirection. Most of the fourteen stories, varied in style and scene and bursting with ingenuity, are from original anthologies. Several will be new to American readers, one new to everybody.

*** Jeanne M. Dams: *Indigo Christmas,* Perseverance, $14.95. In 1904 South Bend, Indiana, former house maid Hilda Johansson, now Mrs. Cavanaugh with servants of her own, plans a holiday party for underprivileged boys and comes to the aid of a former domestic co-worker whose husband is suspected of robbery and murder in the burning of a barn. The culture clashes of high and low society and of Swedish and Irish immigrants carry more interest than the okay mystery. Even readers normally impatient with a leisurely pace and a surfeit of domesticity should admire the author's grasp of period and locale, not just in superficial details but in social attitudes and preoccupations.

*** JoAnna Carl: *The Chocolate Snowman Murders,* Obsidian, $19.95. Lee McKinney Woodyard, chocolate shop proprietor of Warner Pier, Michigan, becomes treasurer of the local Winter Arts Festival and encounters murder involving her fellow committee members. This strong example of the specialty amateur-sleuth genre, nicely written and leavened with humor, has a believable and well-differentiated cast and a tricky plot that doesn't drown in chocolate. Carl is the pseudonym of Eve K. Sandstrom.

*** Barbara Allan: *Antiques Flee Market,* Kensington, $22. In their

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third case, antiques dealers Brandy Borne and her bipolar actress mother attend a flea market to augment their pre-Christmas stock. A murdered dealer, his British Goth granddaughter, and a missing first edition of *Tarzan of the Apes* keep the pages turning. This is surely one of the funniest cozy series going, though some readers may find the humor suspiciously masculine. Behind the collaborative byline are Barbara and Max Allan Collins.

** David Morrell: *The Spy Who Came for Christmas,* Vanguard, $15.95. On Christmas Eve in snowy Santa Fe, double agent Paul Kagan, on the run from the Russian mafia with a baby under his parka, seeks refuge with a battered wife and her courageous son. From an icon of the action thriller, the book provides real suspense once it gets rolling, plus solid research into infant care and weaponry, and an inventive retelling of Jesus' birth as an espionage saga. But flat, flavorless dialogue and narrative with clunkily inserted local color suggest a rush job. Also, the plot is hard to swallow. Can men capable of cruel violence against their fellow human beings be magically redeemed with Christmas standards playing in the background? See what you think.

** C.S. Challinor: *Christmas is Murder,* Midnight Ink, $13.95. In the first of a projected series about Scottish barrister Rex Graves, an assortment of snowed-in holiday guests at a small East Sussex hotel begin to die one by one. It's enjoyable enough low-key reading for classical nostalgics until a gathering-of-the-suspects windup that lacks credibility and conviction. Still, Graves's next case may be worth watching for.

** Maggie Sefton: *Fleece Navidad,* Berkley, $23.95. Readers who are neither series regulars nor knitters could be lost early by this latest about Kelly Flynn and her fellow habitués of Fort Connor, Colorado's House of Lambspun. When a three-time widow of alarmingly accident-prone husbands breezes into the knitting shop, things begin to pick up, based on the reader's expectation that in a mystery things cannot be what they seem, but the people and the solution strain credulity. Recipes and knitting patterns are appended.

*** Hugh Pentecost: *The Battles of Jericho,* introduction by S.T. Karnick, Crippen & Landru, $20 trade paper, $29 hardcover. Red-bearded giant John Jericho, famed painter and crusading righter of wrongs, appeared in several novels along with these 15 *EQMM* short stories between 1964 and 1976. Reflecting the author's concern with the social problems of that troubled era, and drawing on his long experience as a prolific pulp and slick-magazine storyteller, these emotionally charged and cunningly plotted tales should win new fans for MWA Grand Master Pentecost (Judson Philips). Karnick's introduction and an afterword by Daniel Philips, the author's son, are added features.

*** L. Ron Hubbard: *Spy Killer,* Galaxy Press, $9.95. On the run from a murder charge in Shanghai, sailor Kurt Reid becomes embroiled in Chinese vs. Japanese espionage, helped or hindered in turn by two femmes fatales. First published in the April 1936 issue of *Five-Novels Monthly,* this vividly written, super-fast-paced action story shows what an expert pulp writer the controversial founder of Scientology was. Also available in an effective multi-cast audio production at the same price, it's a handsome product in both formats, including period cover and internal illustrations and author hagiography.

*** Sam Stall: *Dracula's Heir,* Quirk, $24.95. In the same dossier format as Duane Swierczynski's *The Crimes of Dr. Watson* (reviewed here in May 2008), this sequel to Bram Stoker's classic novel is an equally effective novella-length **(continued on p. 18)**

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

O CHRISTMAS TREE

by Susanne Mischke

Translated from the German by Mary Tannert

When Luise put down the ax, there was nothing left but the bloody stump.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead, went into the kitchen, and fortified herself with a swallow of Malteser schnapps. Then she picked up the phone.

"This is Mrs. Knochenhauer. You can pick it up now. Yes, right away. The address is Bachstelzenweg 12." She put the phone down without saying goodbye.

Standing at the kitchen window, Luise grimly contemplated the scattered limbs of the slain enemy as they stretched up into the winter sky. Twenty-five feet of richly green, unsuspecting fir tree sprawled in pieces across the driveway, blocking the entrance to the garage.

"How lovely are thy branches . . ." ran through her mind. But not for long! Perhaps the Grim Reaper was sucking the last breath from those plump green needles at this very moment? Luise Knochenhauer decided not to brood any longer. Instead, she poured herself another fortifying dose of the Malteser.

It's difficult to say how and when the tragedy began. The grip of disaster may even stretch back as far as two years ago, when Aldi had a sale on strings of Christmas lights and the Knochenhauers bought one of them and wound it around the stunted pine tree in their little front yard.

That didn't bother me very much back then. Sometimes, when I came home late, I even found the light cheery and homey. And I let myself be talked into buying one of those wooden Christmas pyramids with electric candles and setting it up at the window in the front hall. I got it at the Christmas market—a horrible place, but Steve had talked me into going down there with him. The pyramid's yellowish glow was controlled by a timer, so that it turned

Susanne Mischke says she was "excellently prepared" for a life in crime fiction by early employment as a waitress, an actress, and a test subject for psychology experiments. She holds a degree in business administration and worked for a time as a systems analyst and logician, but soon turned to freelance writing and journalism. She has appeared once before in Passport to Crime (July 2008).

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itself on at twilight and off late in the morning, by which time it was light enough that the moment when the bulbs winked out went almost unnoticed. That's the way the Knochenhauers set up the lights on their pine tree, too, and, a little later, the rope lights that they used to outline their front door. I joked that they were afraid that Santa Claus wouldn't be able to find the entrance to their home, but Helmut Knochenhauer replied pedantically that in the usual run of things Santa Claus came down the chimney, which I certainly ought to know since my husband was American. (The Knochenhauers know that Steve and I aren't married, but they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the fact.)

I found the rope lights obscene. Steve said nothing, but a day later he bought two strings of Aldi lights himself. In the absence of any conifers in our front yard (unfortunately, all the potted Christmas trees we'd ever bought had died), he draped them around the spikes of the antique wrought-iron fence. I didn't much care for this assault on the admittedly severe dignity of my lovely old fence, but I kept my mouth shut. Christmas would be over at some point. Even so, it seemed to me he could at least have asked me whether I minded.

For my taste, we now had plenty of electrically powered Advent cheer on all sides, particularly since at the Knochenhauers', more Christmas spirit had broken out in the form of rope lights in every window, shaped to form holiday motifs—a star, an angel, a Christmas tree, or a Santa Claus. I shuddered in horror every time I looked out the side window. And yet, that was just the beginning.

The following year, Steve and I spent the first week in December visiting his sister, who lived in an upscale Texas neighborhood. Every time anyone came or went by the front door, a plastic snowman the size of a Masai warrior brandished his plastic broom and bawled "Merry Christmas!" I won't describe the inside of the house except to say that the traumatic effects lasted for a long time.

After a long, hard week abroad, the taxi wound through the dark one-way streets of our neighborhood while I anticipated the comforts of home. . . . But the Knochenhauers had adopted *carpe diem* as this year's decorating philosophy. Last year's lights had been wound around their chimney. And clearly Christmas lights had been on sale again at Aldi, because they adorned every cypress and every bare-limbed shrub in the Knochenhauers' front yard. If it went on like this, I prophesied, they would soon be festooning the molehills in the lawn. Their front door was framed with sequentially blinking lights in four different colors—an effect that at first reminded me of the light-therapy effects in the sauna of the local day spa, but on second thought had the cheap look of the basement entrance to the village discotheque. The taxi driver couldn't stop grinning. I was deeply ashamed of my neighborhood.

Steve spent the following afternoon outside, stringing lights on the fence just like last year. I loved the simple little tract house that my parents had built. I'd bought the wrought-iron fence from a dealer whose rather dubious sources I was careful not to inquire about, and had it installed in place of the hunter's fence of my youth. Roses were supposed to wind around its iron spikes, not Christmas lights from Aldi. Why had I ever allowed this mischief the previous year?

After dinner, Steve sat for a few hours in front of the computer and then went to bed, while I forced myself to stay awake until just after midnight in spite of my jet lag. Then I pulled on a hooded parka, stuck a flashlight and the rose shears in my pocket, and snuck out into the damp, cold December night. It could have been lovely: a sickle moon shone above the rooftops and the Big Dipper

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twinkled elegantly, but it was all utterly pointless against the competition from the light show next-door. I took a deep breath of suburban air and got to work. No, not work—I was undertaking an act of self-defense!

Quietly I crept over to the Knochenhauers' front yard. Gently I pulled the plug out of the outdoor socket, cut through the cable a few inches from the plug, chewed a little on the plastic coating of both cut ends, stuck the plug back into the socket, and left the cable lying on the ground. The effect was wonderful, the way you feel when a persistent headache finally lifts. A blanket of peaceful darkness settled over the door, the chimney, and the garden. Only the stars, angels, Christmas trees, and Santa Clauses went on lighting up the windows: They were connected to the power supply inside the house.

Soon the first packages arrived. The Knochenhauers had been kind enough to take delivery of them for us, and when Luise and her husband brought them over—their size and weight necessitated a strong pair of arms—they complained about the marten who'd chewed through the power cords of their Christmas lighting more than once over the past few days.

"Well, it'll be a little relief for your electric bill," I comforted my helpful neighbors. "He did quite a bit of damage over here, too." And that was true: For two days now, our fence had been just a fence.

"Tonight Helmut's going to lie in wait with his gun," whispered Luise Knochenhauer, and then clapped one hand guiltily over her mouth as Helmut surreptitiously elbowed her.

"It's my father's old shotgun. You can keep an old gun like that without a license," Helmut said, his bald head gleaming with rectitude and his fat chest thrust forward in righteousness over his short little legs. Luise nodded eagerly and her permed curls shook in affirmation. Their eyes were aglow with the fever of the hunt.

"*Weidmannsheil!*" I wished Helmut Knochenhauer in the traditional German hunter's greeting, and wrestled the packages into the house. There were two of them, a small one and a big heavy one, both addressed to Steve.

"E-Bay," said Steve by way of explanation, and carried his treasures into the basement. That very evening, I got to see the dancing Christmas tree, which treated me to a tinny rendition of "Jingle Bells" as it waved its plastic arms like a Balinese temple dancer. I asked Steve to move it into his workroom immediately. My tone of voice may have been just a little harsh. Steve called me narrow-minded and intolerant and suspected me of having cut the cable of "his" Christmas lights.

"Which are hanging on *my* fence," I made sure to note.

And as far as that goes, he said, I was treating him like a tenant with whom I was merely coincidentally having a relationship.

We fought about all kinds of things, the frozen pizza burned in the oven, and we went to bed angry and fell asleep back to back.

While our neighbor held a lonely vigil at his kitchen window, I tried to find my way through the maze of stalls at the Christmas market, past the trails of steam and smoke left by mulled wine and sausage stands, doing my best to escape from a giant green plastic octopus croaking "Jingle Bells." I asked a Santa Claus for help, but he turned out to be Steve in disguise, who used the opportunity to put a bag over my head and call the octopus on his mobile phone. Then there was a loud bang. I sat upright in bed, tangled in the sheets. It was ten minutes after

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two A.M., and Helmut Knochenhauer had clearly bagged his prey. The next day, Luise shed tears of regret, sent Helmut to the optician to get his eyes examined, and made him get rid of the shotgun. This relieved me greatly, but they still got the cold shoulder from the rest of the neighborhood for quite some time; the gray tomcat from Number 8 had been very popular with everyone.

When I got home late that evening, a red sphere of light the size of a golf ball gleamed in the dark next to our front door. Had the hunt for the marten been upgraded to infrared weapons? A few more steps, and what to my wondering eyes should appear—in the truest sense of the word—but a life-sized reindeer (at least, that's what I'm assuming). Behind it, perched on the obligatory sleigh, was a fat, white-bearded Santa in a red coat. I approached this ensemble with the caution necessary when closing in on a wounded boar. My experiences in Texas had taught me to be prepared for anything. Right on cue, the reindeer's ears began to waggle and Santa let out a throaty "Ho, ho, ho," before the whole thing fell dark and silent. Then Rudolph's nose lit up again. . . .

I stood frozen for several minutes, unable to move. The reindeer had sweet little ears and a gentle look. Santa Claus looked like God in a grandfatherly moment. There was something moving about them both. I jumped when the front door opened and Steve looked out, a guilty expression on his face like a basset hound caught stealing the Sunday roast.

"Can you set it so that Rudolph's nose always glows?" I asked.

Soon people began to make pilgrimages to our street. The reindeer was the biggest hit since sliced bread. Luise and Helmut were greeting us somewhat curtly by then. The Saturday before the fourth Sunday of Advent, they could be seen in their front yard maneuvering a very long ladder. It had surprised me the entire time that the mighty fir tree, which had stood next to our fence alongside the Knochenhauers' driveway for as long as I could remember, had been spared the brunt of the Christmas decoration orgy. Maybe that was because it had long been much taller than their house and was therefore difficult and surely expensive to illuminate. Just wrapping a couple of strings of lights around the bottom third would have looked amateurish, and Helmut Knochenhauer was a perfectionist. All day he could be seen up on the ladder with strings of lights dangling from his shoulders, balancing in dangerous gymnastic-looking poses between the tree and the rungs of the ladder. By evening, the entire tree gleamed triumphantly with hundreds, even thousands of tiny lights. At the very top, blinking on and off, was a large silver star with a tail.

The reindeer continued to be a favorite with small children, but when I stood surreptitiously at our bedroom window in the dark listening to the commentary, I could tell that the grownups preferred Helmut's tree.

Two days before Christmas Eve, I caught Steve at dawn red-handed, standing at the open window of our bathroom in his red Santa Claus bathrobe and shooting gravel with a slingshot at the silver Star of Bethlehem on the Knochenhauers' tree. I turned away wordlessly. Neither of us mentioned the event again.

When I looked out the window on the morning of Christmas Eve, I saw a snowy landscape like something out of a picture book. And our neighbors had put up yet another decoration to admire. They had acquired one of those Santa Claus figures, popular in recent years, which dangles from the side of the build-

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ing like the victim of a lynching. Except that the Knochenhauers had hung it in the big fir tree. And upon closer examination, it wasn't a Santa Claus. As I stood staring, trying to make sense of the sight, my Texan, his Santa Claus bathrobe flapping behind him, lurched past me out of the house and began to climb the icy, snow-covered fir tree in his bare feet. The gesture was noble but pointless. There was nothing left for the fire department to do but free Helmut Knochenhauer from the tangle of lights that had caught and strangled him as he was trying to replace a couple of burned-out bulbs.

At least, that's what Luise Knochenhauer said. She'd been standing in line at the butcher's to buy the Christmas goose when it happened. Lucky for her.

I, on the other hand, had seen Steve fall from the tree.

I watched as the workmen sawed up and carted away the remnants of the fir tree. Dusk fell, and I opened a bottle of Bordeaux. Our yard and the Knochenhauers' were both quiet and dark. The reindeer had found a new home with the family at Number 8. Steve was presumably somewhere over the Atlantic in the cargo hold of a Boeing 747. The spikes of the wrought-iron fence glowed dimly in the last light of the day. The fire department had had to saw off a couple of them, the ones that Steve had impaled himself on when he fell, but after the holidays I would make sure the fence was expertly repaired, and then everything would be as it had been. Still, I'd miss the big tree. ●

The Jury Box (continued from p. 13)

combination of pastiche and fair-play mystery, spinning off from the short story, "Dracula's Guest," presented as a first chapter omitted from the novel at the last minute. The present-day story of lawyer Jon Kelso, recipient of the various journals, letters, photographs, and other documents for reasons he does not understand, is played fairly straight, but there's some pointed humor along the way, especially in the clue-rich reproduction of a 1905 London tabloid. (Another great gift for vampire buffs is *The New Annotated Dracula* [Norton, $39.95], an exhaustive work of scholarship from Leslie A. Klinger, whose *New Annotated Sherlock Holmes* was an Edgar winner.)

The first book from Surinam Turtle Press, a new imprint of Ramble House (ramblehouse.com), is Gelett Burgess's 1912 collection *Master of Mysteries* ($20 trade paper, $30 hardcover), with an introduction by editor Richard A. Lupoff, a striking cover by Gavin L. O'Keefe, and interior illustrations from the original volume. Phony clairvoyant Astro solves his clients' mysteries via Sherlockian intellect and credits the results to his crystal ball, while training a beautiful young assistant with whom he becomes romantically involved. Based on a sampling, the plots, characters, and humorous style hold up beautifully nearly a century after they first appeared.

The latest from Rue Morgue Press are the 1935 school mystery *A Question of Proof* ($14.95), the first Nigel Strangeways book by Nicholas Blake, pseudonym of one-time poet laureate of Great Britain Cecil Day-Lewis, with an excellent biographical/critical introduction by publishers Tom and Enid Schantz; and Catherine Aird's 1970 novel *The Stately Home Murder* ($14.95), with its sure-fire background for classical detection and a solution with special (but obviously unmentionable) delight for traditionalists. ●

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Prisoner in Paradise

by Dennis Richard Murphy

It didn't add up. Snake didn't add up. Snake Kettering in downtown Nicoya certainly didn't add up. But to Terry Doran, neither did a hot December midday in a Costa Rican Chinese restaurant with a white plastic Christmas tree flashing like a cruiser rack at a crime scene.

Slumped beside the hyperactive tree, Doran was a large man, mid fifties by the creases on a face as yellowed and worn as a word-game dictionary. An athletic man once, by the size of his arms. Sweat stood out on his brow and collected in his deep laugh lines and the thick wrinkles of his neck, stained the collar and stretched the armholes of his grey tank top as the downdraft of sluggish ceiling fans fought the steam rising from deep-fried egg rolls and scalding plum sauce.

Dennis Richard Murphy had his fiction debut in *EQMM* in 2003, won an Arthur Ellis Award for the 2006 *EQMM* story "Fuzzy Wuzzy," and became a friend to us all at Dell Magazines. It was with great sadness that we learned of his premature death in June 2008. The following is the last new Murphy story we know of, but the Canadian author's first novel, *Darkness at the Break of Noon*, will appear posthumously from Harper Collins Canada (February '09). †

Wrinkling his brow, grasping for a lost thought, Doran stared at the table holding his lunch, two empty long-necked bottles of Bavaria Negra, and a collection of condiments. He toyed with the objects as he stared through them, unwittingly nudging them into a nativity scene of salt-and-pepper-shaker shepherds, soy-sauce sheep, and *salsa picante* cattle. Beer-bottle Magi hovered over a cylindrical stainless-steel Baby Jesus that prevented cheap napkins from escaping the matching manger, limiting the sins of the world from littering its streets.

With the back of his big-knuckled hand he plowed the scene aside, tipping the soy bottle and wiping his wet fingers on his faded board shorts. Doran bit into one of the egg rolls but it was still too hot. He gutted them with chopsticks to let the steam escape and absently scratched his belly. Twists of grizzled grey hair stuck out of his ears and from under a grimy Argonauts ball cap with a curved peak. He wore a pair of black rubber flip-flops with rainbow-colored straps he'd found on the corner for less than two thousand colónes.

He'd spotted Snake Kettering from the line at the bank. Doran had driven the thirty miles to Nicoya with two weeks' worth of cash sales weighing down his shorts. As he waited under the watchful gaze of unsmiling security guards in crisp blinding-white shirts he saw a flash of orange hat through the window, a swatch of long, blond, dirty hair partially hidden by a high rucksack with a sleeping bag tied below. The turn of a head, the profile of a thin face, and spotty facial hair and maybe a bad tattoo . . . Doran was sure it was Kettering. Dead sure.

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But it didn't add up. Of course Terrence "Terry" Corcoran Doran here didn't add up either. An ex-cop with a capital X, imagining he saw the ghost that caused him to be here in the first place. Shake your head, Doran. It's the beer talking. Last night's beer. Or this morning's.

If he gave up his place in the bank line he wasn't sure the guards or the permanently smiling woman behind him would let him in again, even if he had the Spanish to explain what he wanted. It was an interminable twenty minutes before his deposit was made and he walked outside. The midday air hit like Nam napalm after the air conditioning. He scanned the town park but saw no one he recognized, no tattooed arm, no orange flash like the briefly exposed underwing of a parrot. No dirty blond hair. He drove to pick up supplies in the northwest of town, slowing to check everyone he passed before returning to the park in the town center. The shop windows were crammed with cheap toys, plastic Christmas tree lights in the shape of oranges and poinsettias, table centerpieces with candles melted by the heat, lying limply between brassy Christmas ornaments like spent erections. He covered some blocks on foot, looking in every shop, until he broke a sandal and bought the rainbow-strapped flip-flops. It was too damned hot for this.

No *Ticos* walked the Nicoya streets at noon. A German couple came through the door wearing sensible hiking shoes and expensive daypacks, lured—like Doran—by the bogus sanctuary implied by strings of dusty paper international flags looped between ceiling fans. They dragged a petulant teenaged boy, embarrassed by having parents, blue-white legs capped by skimpy Euro-soccer shorts.

Siesta. That's where the *Ticos* were. Nodding off on some shaded porch or spread-eagled under a slow-moving fan. Doran still couldn't do *siestas.* He was no napper. He spent the hours drinking at Jesse's, thinking about things. Like what Snake Kettering was doing in Nicoya. The scumbag punk belonged in prison back home, freezing his butt off with his biker buddies until they died from frostbite or old age.

The egg rolls wouldn't cool. Doran felt anxious. He threw some bills on the table and walked out to where the Land Cruiser roasted in the sun. He'd bought the turquoise truck two years before from an American surfer who needed money to stay in Costa Rica. Everybody who came here wanted to stay. The *Se Vende* sign was still stuck to the back window in case anyone was interested in a 1987 four-door, four-by-four five-speed with a 4.2-liter inline six and Aussie "roo bars." He checked the stability of the condiments and oil jugs in the back and drove the dusty block to avoid the main-road bridge repair, under construction since before he arrived.

On the road back to the village he drove the speed limit, dodging lazy iguanas and potholes the depth of armadillos, watching herds of dozy rabbit-eared cattle languidly stand under solitary trees as if they'd forgotten their long-term plans in mid cud. He slowed for the metal-studded speed bumps that regularly announced school crossing areas, driving around groups of children holding hands to walk home in clean, pressed uniforms. It was a good life here if you had a little money. You didn't need much. The temperature was perfect year round on the coast, the beer cold and cheap if you knew where to drink, the locals generally diffident and polite. Even in what the tourist hustlers called "the green season" it only rained hard for a predictable hour every afternoon and even vehicles lower slung than the Land Cruiser could ford the backcountry rivers most of the year.

Doran had landed in Liberia with a small bank account in his pocket and a large chip on his shoulder about a wasted lifetime as a cop. About getting tossed off the force for being the cop he was. About losing Donna Logan, about losing his badge.

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Three years later he owned a two-room apartment with a terrace a block from the beach. He had an unplanned business that was unexpectedly profitable, a girlfriend of sorts if Rita would just relax and enjoy the moment, and an expatriate collection of odd, itinerant people who served as friends. Not bad for a northern failure.

Doran fiddled with the radio dial, trying to find some music that wasn't guitars racing each other to the end of a song. He turned right in a well-kept village where a group of small children and their minders sat quietly in the heat beneath trees, watching men with dark complexions and high cheekbones drowsily assemble small midway rides on a shadeless soccer field. Indians maybe, over the Nicaraguan border for seasonal work. In front of the church, lighter-skinned local men with fat faces, black moustaches, and white teeth laughed and teased each other as they jiggled ladders and applied fresh aluminum paint to a free-standing cross. Watching the preparations for the weekend village fiesta, Doran missed the bump for the school and the truck and his 200 pounds went airborne.

He was halfway home, halfway from Nicoya to Doran's Beachfront Fish and Chips—*Pescado y patatas fritas—Abierto 4-8 P.M.,* the chip shack that, to his amazement, more than paid the bills. Javier did most of the work, anyway. Not a job that weighed on you like being a cop did; it was a vacation, not a vocation. He snorted, as if he'd expressed himself out loud and had to agree in kind. If Detective Sergeant Terry Doran as a fry chef was a joke, Snake Kettering being here was a laugh. Except that Donna Logan wasn't laughing. She was colder than the by-the-book bastards Doran had left behind, deader than the job he'd been stripped of after thirty-three years. Thirty-three years, he thought, with two gongs for investigator of the year, one for bravery under fire, the other for being shot in the shoulder. After three houses, three dogs, and two wives.

Cop divorces are obvious long before they transpire. You could say they begin at the altar, at least for real cops, not for the upwardly mobile office staff more attuned to overtime and retirement planning than case files. Both the separations were amicable, meaning there was nothing at stake except escape—no investments, no kids, nothing much to share except holiday snaps of better times. And pets. He'd won custody of a shepherd, lost a beagle, and given a mad mutt named Enforcer to Steve Bidalki when he left the cold.

The divorce from the department was not amicable. He still liked to think he'd told Müller where to shove the Logan case and his entire department, but the truth was that the inspector had canned him on charges ranging from assaulting a civilian to interfering in the proper conduct of an investigation. Thirty-eight-year-old real-estate agent Donna Logan had been brutally raped and beaten before being dumped like a bad camper's garbage off the logging road that runs from Fox Creek to the Park. Her attacker didn't kill her. She froze to death on the side of the road in January. A trapper found her body in the spring, two and a half months after she'd gone missing from Fox Creek and Doran's bed, ravaged so much by animals that any postmortem forensic examination was a waste of report forms.

Doran knew that Kettering had killed her. He tasted it. Everything that had made him a damned good cop for so long told him he was right. It was just a matter of time. Meanwhile the punk had taunted him, whispering innuendos to his pals, sneering in Doran's ear one late night in the bar of the Auberge Voyageur until the detective lost it and beat him unconscious, leaving him to Donna's fate on the black ice of the parking lot. If only. Inspector Müller's reaction to the formal charges laid by Kettering was to haul Doran off the case. Of course he

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should never have been on it in the first place. He knew that, too. But only his partner Bidalki knew Donna was his girl.

The suspension snuffed a lifetime of devotion for Doran and the media vultures loved it. Newspaper guys he'd refused to tip or provide with sound bites condemned him on the front pages as a dysfunctional bully and mewed sympathy for a petulant Kettering. Cops with whom he'd refused to get drunk, play Friday-night cribbage, or share the spoils that fell off a truck reveled in his collapse. Sour-faced young men with expensive suits and thin briefcases came from Toronto to sneer at the local restaurants and study his file.

While he awaited their decision Doran still worked the case from home. It engrossed him. It owned him. With Steve Bidalki's reluctant inside help he came closer and closer to proving Kettering's complicity in Donna Logan's rape and murder. But not close enough. And not in time. He gambled his career to prove Kettering guilty, and lost. Until today.

Jesse Rubin used a torn T-shirt to wipe bat guano off the bar speakers over which a Bob Marley CD played. "You sure it was this Snake guy you saw, Terry?" he said. The surf was high-tide loud behind Doran, who sat on a rattan barstool and picked with his thumbnail at the wet label of a Negra. Jesse always introduced himself as "just Jesse" but Doran had seen an envelope months ago with a surname on it and committed it to memory. He wasn't being nosy. He was a cop. He collected stuff. Stored it away. Brought it forward when it was relevant. He had a filing cabinet for a brain, stuffed with random details that might add up to something someday.

"Nope. Couldn't be sure with the crowd and the backpack and the reflections on the bank glass and all. Looked like him, though. Scrawny punk. Little beard—one of those right here." Doran pointed a broad fingernail under his bottom lip. "Orange net hat, high above the brim like a trucker's or a hick's. Blurry tattoo on his left arm and shoulder. Ring in his right ear—at the top, not the earlobe . . ."

"Christ, every kid born since nineteen eighty has ink and rings, Terry." Jesse shook his gray ponytail. "I think Sunset was born with pierced ears, man. Had her first tattoo when she was three. Didn't cry a bit." Sunset was Jesse's daughter. They were over forty now, Doran thought, all those nineteen-sixties kids named Sunrise and Morning Star and Peace and Psychedelia . . . "Or is that how you cops work? Jumping to conclusions, seeing things where there ain't nothing to see? Damn bats . . ." He swiped at the tiny droppings with the rag.

"Count your lucky stars, Jess. If the cops back in your hood had jumped to a few obvious conclusions, you'd still be wearing orange as the cellblock sweetheart of San Quentin."

Jesse laughed, a forced laugh. He nodded, raised his eyebrows. "We're not that much different, Terry my man. We took different roads to get here, but we're now podners in paradise, man." He wiped black pellets off the counter again. He looked up to where the vampire bats slept in the dark corners of the bar's thatched roof.

"You shine some lights up there, the bats won't come," said Doran. Jesse nodded as if he'd heard that before. "Look pretty at night, too."

" 'Nother beer?" Doran shook his head, studied his watch as if it was broken. "Nah, gotta go. Change the oil over today. Ready for the Christmas rush." He dug in his pocket for some brass change and counted out a thousand colónes. He still did the exchange math when he bought something. He couldn't let himself give it up. A buck a beer, he thought. Some people's definition of paradise.

"You mean you actually change that stuff?" said Jesse. "I don't believe it."

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Doran hiked up his shorts, put his money on the counter, and gave Jess the finger.

"Every three years, Jess. Needs it or not. Like your keg lines." Jesse waved and flicked his rag at the countertop. Terry Doran laughed, turned the finger into a wave back, and shuffled through powdered gray sand to the palm-thatched wooden shack. The sign showed a painted strip of white sand and a fishing boat too high out of the water. Sunset had painted it for him for ten thousand colónes. Less than twenty bucks. He'd strung a length of multi-colored Christmas lights over it last year and left them up. He undid the padlock on the back door and listened to the geckos scurry for cover when he turned on the lights. He was okay with the small green lizards and the iguanas and turkey vultures that roamed the town. They ate bugs and roadkill and earned their keep. He supposed the bats did too, but he'd never like them—some midnight memory of his mother screaming and holding a magazine over her long brown hair while his father, pissed as ever, swung wildly at the bedroom air with a newspaper until he fell over and passed out.

The tide was almost in now, the wash only twenty feet away, where in a few hours it would be a long hike to the water. Doran pottered around with the plastic pails, draining one fryer into an empty bucket, then scraping out the gritty residue of burnt batter before pouring in the clean yellow oil. There was something satisfying about the process, about refreshing a system, about starting over. Maybe refreshing Terry Doran was that simple. Changing his oil. He had to let Steve know about Kettering in any case. He'd check out the state of things back there. Maybe some memories were shorter than his. Maybe Snake Kettering was his key to finding out.

It was dark and stuffy in the chip shack, but he knew if he opened the flaps to let in light and air the line would begin and he wasn't ready for customers. He never was. That's why he hired Javier, who'd taken this week off to visit his family in lieu of Christmas when the crowds from San José would build. Doran drained the second fryer into the newly empty bucket, cleaned it, and refilled it. He hauled both containers of dirty oil to the truck and hefted them into the back. He tugged out the striped plastic bags of supplies purchased in Nicoya—Heinz Ketchup for the Americans, Crosse and Blackwell Malt Vinegar for the Brits and Canadians, Hellman's Mayonnaise for the Europeans, salt for all of them. It had been a smart idea to open a chip wagon. Not his. Steve's wife Martha—no, "Marta"—had come up with it. They'd come down to visit after a few months. Steve liked the rustic village but Marta was an all-inclusive resort-package girl and it had been her frustration with the food and facilities that had her loudly wishing for just one good chip truck.

"With all this damned fish, it should be easy. And how difficult can frying potatoes be? They fry everything else here."

Detective Constable Steve Bidalki was the only one who figured DS Doran was right about Snake killing Donna. Bidalki had worked with him long enough to know Doran's hunches paid off, but even Steve knew the Donna Logan case was too close to home. Doran wondered how Steve would react if he could get Kettering to talk after all this time—you scored big points closing cold cases these days. Maybe it would give the kid the boost he deserved. Get him his sergeant's stripes or at least a commendation.

Sitting in the cool dark of the chip shack sipping a warm Imperial liberated from the beer-batter supply, Doran's stomach growled. He should have eaten the egg rolls. Tourists outside muttered, wondering why the business wasn't open at four o'clock when the sign said it opened at four o'clock. He waited until they left

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before he tied on a greasy apron and pushed open the flap for business.

It was seven o'clock before he could take advantage of a lull and close the flap. The local kids' pickup soccer game on the hard wet sand had come with the sunset and gone with the dark. Doran had kept an eye focused beyond their skinny silhouettes and fast footwork, looking for an orange hat and blond hair. Backpackers didn't come to this part of the world to stay in market towns like Nicoya. You went there to bank, to the hospital or the pharmacy, to buy supplies. Backpackers came here for the beaches and cheap hostels or campgrounds. Serious surfers traveled the rutted roads south over the headlands, past Playa San Miguel and Coyote to Santa Teresa and Mal Pais. The wealthy settled in the gated resorts and on the golf greens north toward Tamarindo.

If I was Kettering, I'd come to this village, he thought. The beach was nice, the surf not too challenging, places to camp south of town. Yeah, he thought as he pushed the fat padlock closed and walked up the beach to Jesse's, the Snake might just slither right into Doran's cave. He was ready for him. Ready for justice. Wouldn't it be something if this punk was Doran's ticket back? Back to the cold. Back to the life.

Jesse's was jammed, not that he liked it that way. The local service industry's attitude was to make a living, not a fortune. When he saw Doran coming he hefted a barstool over the counter and held his hand on it until Terry claimed it and a corner of the beachside bar. A group of over-refreshed American youngsters stared at the old man in a dirty tank top with a "who the hell are you" attitude but they weren't drunk enough—or tough enough—to say it out loud.

Doran sipped his Negra and turned to face the beach. The tide receded quickly now, the gray sand flat and shiny with water reflecting a nearly full moon. The sand crabs, barely visible in the wisps of light from a sunset now two hours out in the Pacific, played a nervous game of sidle-and-seek with the few couples who strolled by.

Terry heard the Sanchez horses before he saw them and he hardly saw them at all. Tourist trail-ride nags all day, now they showed their fire a hundred yards out in the shallow surf. Eight or ten or twelve of them raced south, heads high and manes snapping proudly in the wind, high-stepping in the waves like carriage hackneys, black against black on the unlit beach. Only the white water they disturbed evidenced their reality as, like specters, they danced an exquisite nightmare and then were gone. Each time the Sanchez horses raced the beach it moved him. It was Doran's private test to see if he still felt anything. His eyes went wet, as if the only two emotions left to him were cynicism and tears. He hadn't a lot of heart left for loyalty or duty or love. That reminded him of Rita. She was working until ten and he needed to see her.

A nod to Jesse to put the Negra on his tab. A nod back and Doran left the kids using beer and loud talk to fix a world that wasn't as broken as the homes they came from. He shuffled up to where the main street met the sand, past the small police station two local cops never seemed to leave. If there was any crime in town Doran missed it and so would the cops if they stayed indoors. Maybe that's why they did. He stepped up the high curb to the town's only sidewalk. Halfway up the block, set back from the road across from the real-estate office, was Canopy Tours: Scooter Rentals and Internet Café.

It was cool inside. As usual in the evening, there was a line for the six computers. Nobody sent postcards or bought film anymore. The kids—all of them wait-

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ing were young—sent e-mails and digital pictures and chatted in real time to faraway friends they could see on the screen. Rita smiled at him from her chair and wiggled. She looked good tonight. Pretty. Doran realized he hadn't shaved or changed for a couple of days, maybe longer, and took off his hat to atone. Rita wiggled again. She was proud of her cleavage and had the body for it. Even in her forties she still kept the scooter-renters, tour-takers, and chat-room chums enthralled with the shimmy of her breasts. She didn't possess a top that wasn't scooped into a deep V. Her skin was the color of coffee with one cream and her shiny black hair was pulled back from her brow and tied in a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had returned to town from a job with a travel agency in San José to care for her father out on the Nosara road. When she wasn't at Doran's.

"Hey Terry. *Buenas tardes.*" She had a great smile. Perfect white teeth and black-cherry lips. She wiggled again when she turned her chair to face him. "What brings you here, *amigo*?" Doran could tell by her smile that she assumed she had brought him here."

"You. What else?" he said, but his forced smile called him a liar. Doran hated lies, especially his own. "And I need to e-mail home . . . to a friend, I mean. Work. To Bidalki. 'Member him? Steve?" Rita nodded, letting the honest truth outbid the loving lie. She glanced around the room.

"Maybe in an hour, Terry. No sooner. Say nine o'clock? Nine-fifteen, maybe?" Doran nodded and put his hat back on.

"Sure. Nine-ish. I'll be back." His exit was complicated by the German couple and their son from the restaurant in Nicoya carrying oversized motorcycle helmets. The boy's palms and bare leg were scraped and bleeding. His parents seemed determined he should learn some lesson from that and Rita should bear witness. Doran left. He didn't like the sound of German.

He walked the two blocks past the *Super Mercado*, its small driveway jammed with the four-wheel-drive trucks and dirt bikes of late grocery shoppers. At the rear of the chip shack he jumped in the Land Cruiser and drove the twisting road south to Playa Carillo. The air was cool on his face through the window. Camping was illegal on the beach, but sometimes kids without any money pretended they couldn't read the signs and did it anyway. Even Spanish-speaking kids. Tonight it was deserted. He drove past the long curve of double-planted palms to the south end where the charter fishing boats moored and walked down to the water. The moon was higher now and the perfect arc of breaking surf shone in its light. The mountains came close to the sea here. Lights twinkled down from expensive houses where people sipped nightcaps on cool tiled decks and looked far out to the lights of container ships and tankers heading north from Panama. He'd have a hard time explaining to a sane man why he wanted to be somewhere else, why he wanted to be someone else. He kicked off the flip-flops, tossed his shirt and hat on the sand, and waded into the warm white froth of the receding surf.

On the way back to Rita's he stopped at a small campground on the mountain side of the road. There were five tents pitched on a narrow palm-treed lot, all colorful backpacker domes. The manager emerged when he heard the Toyota on the gravel. Doran mimed sleeping and pointed at the tents. The man laughed, shook his head, said, "*Siempre fiesta,*" snapping his fingers like castanets and pointing toward town. Doran made it back to the internet café at ten to nine and waited fifteen minutes before a machine became free.

Steve Bidalki's e-mail address was the only one he knew. On the drive he'd

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thought about what to say. He'd keep it businesslike, professional. Make it sound like an investigative report and not some obsessed cop picking at old scabs. He typed Hello, asked after Marta, said things were going well, and guessed at the local temperature. He invited them down again and then got down to business. Is Müller still around? Any developments on the Donna Logan case? Any word on the whereabouts of Roland "Snake" Kettering? How cold is it there today, anyway? And Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Oh, and pass that on to anyone who might remember me. Then the punch line. *"Saw something today that could make us both heroes. Regards, Terry."* He clicked "Send." A dark-haired boy was waiting to use the computer so Doran stood up.

Rita glanced around the room to see if anyone was looking, then waved away the 350 colónes Doran was trying to pay. She winked at him, more and more North American every day, and smiled. "Is Detective Doran back on the job?"

"Detective Staff Sergeant. Retired." Doran sat down on the chair at the end of her desk.

"Sorry."

"It's okay. I saw something—someone—in Nicoya today. Someone from the past. A bad man."

"Tico? Gringo? White guy?"

Leaning forward, Doran told her. In a whisper he described the hair, the hat, the top, the tattoo, the backpack. She whispered back, "Well, that man was in here tonight, Terry. Sitting right there at Station 2. Where you were just now."

"When? When, Rita? When was he here?" With a sinking heart Doran realized he hadn't asked Bidalki to send a photograph of Kettering. He'd been off the job too long. That was just stupid. How could he do a proper professional search without a frigging photograph?

"When you were here. What time was that? The first time. Must've been around eight if I said there'd be an hour wait."

"Are you sure it was the same guy?"

"Like your description. Not a kid. Maybe thirty-three, thirty-five. Little beard here under his lip. Orange hat with a picture of some big truck on it. We make them take them off in here, hats I mean. Don't know why *Norte Americanos* wear hats indoors. Even church. No respect." Doran slipped off his hat but Rita didn't notice. "Dirty blond hair and clothes. Sleeping rough, probably. Sleeping bag tied to his backpack. Had a tattoo on his right—no left—shoulder, maybe an eel or snake or something. Kind of homemade but big, with the ink all blurry. Ugly thing . . ." Doran looked around the room in panic, face to face to face to face. "He's not here now, Terry. He sent his e-mail or had his chat. He was only here ten minutes or so. He paid and left. He smelled bad."

"Can you trace it? Can you tell where he sent it? Who he talked to?"

"It's private, Terry. That's the whole point of this. It's private. . . ."

"Rita. Can you?"

"Well, if they didn't erase it from the Sent file we can. . . ."

"Do it, Rita. Do it now." If Kettering had communicated with one of his buddies, Doran would know where he was from. That it was him. Rita jiggled, then stood up and leaned forward. Her breasts threatened to pop out of her dress.

"We'll do it when the machine is available, Terry. We close in twenty minutes. We may have to wait until then."

It was a longer twenty minutes than the bank lineup. Doran walked the side-

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walk, grunting and nodding at shopkeepers and transient jewelry sellers who knew him, kicking himself for not requesting the ID photograph from Bidalki, for not staying in closer touch with home, for losing it and beating up Kettering in the Voyageur, for pissing off Müller and giving him reason to sack him. When he returned to the internet café, the dark-haired kid on the Number 2 machine was still typing. From outside Doran watched as Rita turned out lights and turned off computers. The kid didn't move. Rita finally looked out the window, hands on her hips, seeking help. Doran went in.

"Time's up, kid."

"I'll just be a minute or two," he said, staring at the screen and typing rapidly. "Dylan finally came online and I wanna . . ."

"Tomorrow, kid," repeated Doran. The young, slight boy finally raised his eyes to see a 200-pound-plus ex-cop with three days' growth of beard and an immediate agenda.

"Yes sir." He took forever paying up and leaving. Doran and Rita sat down at the machine. Deftly she clicked keys and opened the mail program. Doran noticed that her fingers were slim, her nails carefully painted the same color as her lips during some lull in the day. For him? In the mail program she went to "Sent" and a list of e-mails scrolled out on the screen.

"Jesus," said Doran. "We'll never . . ."

"Shh," said Rita. "What time did I say it was?"

"Around eight." She highlighted five messages sent from the computer between 7:55 and 8:10 that evening. Doran stared at the first one. "Open it." Rita double-clicked. It was from someone named Gerda to a girl name Renata whose address ended in "de". "Deutschland. Not it. Try the next." It was from the same Gerda to another friend in Germany.

"I think you're sexy when you're on the job, Terry. I bet you were a very sexy cop, *amigo.*"

"Next." He smiled in spite of himself. It felt good to him, too.

"We don't know if he even sent an e-mail, Terry. Maybe he just signed on to a chat . . ."

"Next."

Rita moved the mouse. Tara this time, writing to Mom. She moved to the fourth message. "Bingo," said Doran.

The message was short: *"Hey B: This place is so cool. Pam trees, hot chicks in nothing but thongs and coconut oil. Good weed. No cops. No hassles. Friggin monkeys in the friggin trees man. Cheap beer. Fulltime summer. Lotsa rich bastards. Sleepin on the beach under a boat for free. You gotta come when your sprung man. I'll probly still be here. Friggin paradise man."* It was addressed to "B" and signed "S". The address was MNCI—Mid-Northern Correction Institution—a medium-security lockup forty-five kilometers from Fox Creek.

"Gotcha. Check the next one." When he saw it was written by someone else Doran was out the door faster than a dirt bike. He drove as fast as he could to the rutted road at the end of the bay where the local fishing boats beached. He knew the road by heart, even in the dark. He or Javier came here once a week to buy fresh corvine, dorado, tilapia—whatever was being caught. He drove onto the hard-packed sand. The tide was far out now, the surf maybe three hundred meters from the hotels and homes. Doran didn't know if there was some law against driving on the beach, just that nobody did it. He could taste the chase

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again. Like slow-melting caramel, sweet at the back of the tongue but sharp in the throat. It felt so good. It had been so long.

He shut out the Cruiser's lights, geared down, and turned north, letting the clutch and the pull of second gear tug him northward, staring into the black until his eyes could see shapes. There were never many boats on the beach. A couple of old ones were permanently situated and painted with the names of the beachfront bars behind them. The ones that were used regularly by fishermen spent little time ashore. He stopped a hundred yards from the first one he saw, turned off the engine, and sat quietly with the window down. The roll of the surf masked his sounds. He searched blindly in the glove compartment, then in the broken console between the seats, feeling the long barrel of a D-cell flashlight, then the thin rusty shaft of a tire iron. He took both, leaving the truck door open. The interior lights had never worked.

Doran crept toward the overturned boat. It was a small one, wooden, locally built judging by the way the side planks overlapped and curved upward to the stern. He approached from the side that touched the sand, listening for snores or coughs as he crept closer. Even up in the dry sand the damned surf made it difficult to hear anything else. He bit his lower lip with anticipation and tasted the tinny tang of blood. Go.

He came around the bow and knelt down. With the tire iron raised in his right hand he clicked on the flashlight with his left. The flashlight didn't go on. He struck the barrel against the boat and a pale yellow light flickered and died. He tapped it again, then realized that if someone was there they'd be awake by now. And if they were armed, he'd be dead. Had he forgotten every damned thing he'd ever learned? He swore and unscrewed the barrel, poured the batteries out, rearranged the order, and blew out the sand grit he could feel in the cap threads. He tried it again. Better. Good enough to see no one was under the boat and no one had been. Doran walked back to the truck, wondering what else he'd forgotten.

He drove north again. The next two boats lay side by side, gunnels so deep that they provided little shelter. Doran aimed the Land Cruiser lights at them and flicked on the high beams to make certain both were empty, then shut the truck down and jumped out to confirm.

He was halfway up the beach now, nearer the village than the fishing port. Maybe he'd misunderstood the e-mail. Or maybe Kettering had been bragging to his prison pal about sleeping on the beach. Then he saw him. Between the truck and the surf. He stared into the black to tune his night vision. The guy was staggering. Drunk, maybe. Singing something to himself out loud. Skinny bastard. He wore his orange hat high and back on his head and his thumbs were tucked under the straps of his pack. His little beard moved with his mouth and his sleeping bag banged rhythmically against the backs of his thighs as he weaved down the beach, yelling "whooo-hoo" every time a wave soaked his sandals.

"Whooo-hoo. Screw you, Snake," said Doran under his breath. He jumped in the truck, started it up, flicked on the high beams, shoved it into first, and drove. Kettering didn't look up until Doran was upon him. He didn't move. He stood there, as stupid as Doran knew he was, as frozen as Doran knew the chickenshit punk would be in battle. Without his pals around. Without a woman to beat up and rape and leave for animals to rip apart. What happened next was pure impulse. The impact was not as loud or definitive as Doran had hoped. He'd wanted a bang, a noise as explosive as his victory, a bone-breaking exclamation

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mark to end a sentence that had been running on for far too long. But the gentle breeze and persistent surf swallowed all sounds. It wasn't until he dragged the limp form into the chip shack that he discovered he was dead. Not that it really mattered. Kettering's body wouldn't be his ticket home—not without a confession. But Donna Logan was avenged.

Terry Doran woke in a fog. The first thing he saw through the bedroom door was the empty bottle of Absolut on the table in the other room, bathed in blue light like the Virgin in a village church. The angle of the sun said it must be after seven. He had something pressing on the agenda today but was in no rush to find out what it was. That's what Costa Rican coffee was for—start your heart and your brain will follow. He stood up and steadied himself on his dresser, waiting for a faint spell that didn't come. He was wearing the clothes he had on yesterday and could not remember going to bed.

He realized that it was a sound that had woken him, a sound that had stopped now, as if only audible in its absence. No bloody wonder with the morning racket at its peak. Off the terrace Howler monkeys argued over tree territory, a toucan shouted back, and macaws darted about in dazzling, frantic pairs. Homely brown birds with songs louder than necessary were building condo nests in the dead palm. It must have been Rita knocking, judging by the Canopy Tours envelope slipped under the door. Doran pulled at his face as if it were a rubber mask, scratched his eyes, and opened the envelope with his thumb.

Hey Terry. Long time, buddy. Great to hear from you, especially at this time of year when we count our blessings even if we forget to the rest of the time. Marta says hello and promises she'll send you an article she clipped out about why Swiss Chalet fries are so good if she finds it. The lard, she thinks it was. Emma also says hello, or would if she could—she's only 11 months but is built like a surfer so watch out "Uncle Terry," she'll be on your doorstep in 20 years asking to crash on your couch. She might be accompanied by what we're calling "The Bump," a little guy or girl—we don't want to know—who's living in Mommy's tummy until early May. Whooda thunk, eh Sarge? A Bidalki dynasty. If it's a guy I'm threatening to call it Terry. Is that short for something?

Work goes okay. Yes, Müller is still around, stroking everyone in sight to make Detachment Commander before retirement to boost his pension payments. He's stroking me too, I guess, as I made sergeant, one of five now in the region and two in Detectives. I wished him Merry Christmas like you said, but he holds grudges, I guess. Don't ask.

They say there might be a white Christmas here, but nobody's betting on it. Hope so for the kids' sake. And for your dog. Marta renamed her Harriet and she loves the kids and the snow. I guess you don't have to worry about this boring stuff anymore—kids or dogs or snow.

I was sure I wrote you about the other stuff, but maybe not. It's been busy. Kettering was busted in a crack house down in the city last July, so high he confessed right away to killing Donna Logan. So you were right. He's got life in Kingston without possible parole for at least twenty. I hope that's closure for you, as they say. What did you see that'll make us heroes? I could use the publicity and a raise with all these kids around. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to you guys in paradise from all of us imprisoned here in the north country.

Steve. ●

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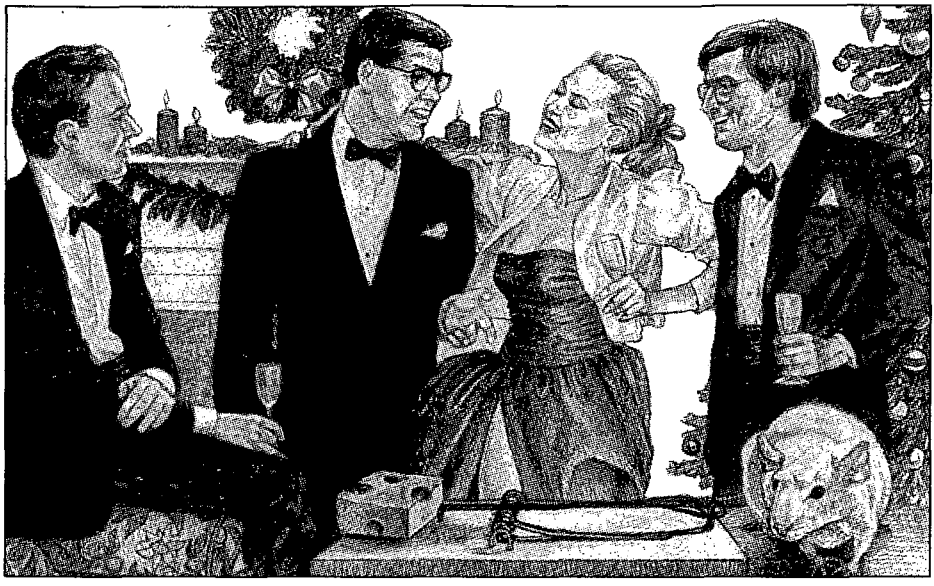

Art by Laurie Harden

MOUSE

by Caroline Benton

"I'll kill her!" Sally wailed, dabbing carefully at her eyes. "I mean it, Steph. One of these days I'll . . . God, look at my face! I can't go back in looking like this."

"You must." Her friend passed her another tissue. "Otherwise she'll know she's upset you."

"Of course she's upset me! You heard what she said—you and the rest of the damned room!" She winced. "I can't *believe* she put me down like that. Just like last year. I swore then I'd never come again."

"So why did you?"

"Pete, of course. *He's* not going to miss the Morans' party."

"You needn't have come."

"And have him here on his own?" She gave a snort. "Anyway, why should I miss it because of that—that—"

"Try some soap," Stephanie said. "Your mascara's run."

"I wish *she* would. Run off to Scotland or wherever it is she's spending Christmas and damn well stay there. Better still, get buried by an avalanche. She mightn't be so hot under twenty feet of snow."

She turned on the gold-plated tap, moistened the tissue, and rubbed it against the soap. It was a highly scented soap, rose pink, lying in a gold-plated shell presided over by a cherub. The guest *en suite* bathroom had cost the Morans a small fortune. Jilly Moran would have been mortified to know how

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little the women were noticing.

"It was snowing when we arrived," Steph said. "Did you notice? They're forecasting a white Christmas."

"Great!" Sally scrubbed beneath her eyes. "Last time we had snow the central-heating boiler packed up."

"Oh, don't be such a pessimist!"

"Why not? Everything's going wrong. This place was great until she arrived, *now* look at it."

"It's not that bad . . ."

"Not for you, maybe. Your Ian's got his head screwed on. *Pete* thinks the sun shines out of her cleavage. He's probably down there now making a complete prat of himself. You know what he's like when he's had a few drinks." She leaned towards the mirror and started to repair the damage. "Anyway, it beats me what they see in her," she muttered, liberally applying foundation. "Apart from the boobs. God knows she's nothing special to look at. *And* she's overweight."

"Thanks!"

"What?"

"She's thinner than me."

"Oh, you know what I mean."

Stephanie did. Time for another diet.

"And as for that stupid name . . . *Mouse!* How'd she get a name like that?"

Stephanie didn't answer. She was busy frowning at her own reflection. Beside her friend she looked drab and pallid. Perhaps if she coloured her hair . . .

"I'll bet she made it up herself," Sally continued, reaching for the blusher. "To add mystery. Or perhaps her real name's too awful to use—Ethel or Mildred or . . ."

"Her initials are G.M.," Stephanie said. "I saw it on a letter."

"Like the tomatoes?"

"What?"

"You know, the veg and stuff they muck around with . . ."

"Genetically modified." Steph allowed herself a smile. "You're right. I hadn't thought of that."

"Well, she'll get genetically modified if she puts *me* down again!" Sally promised. "I'll see to it personally. Anyway, how's that?" She stood back to survey her handiwork. "How do I look?"

Like you need scraping, Stephanie thought, but settled for a white lie.

"You look fine. No one will notice."

"You think?"

"I think. Now get back in there and rescue your man."

Jilly Moran saw them come back in. Sally had obviously been crying. Wretched woman, she thought, glaring across at Mouse. She'd deliberately not sent her an

Here with an evocative Christmas tale is British author Caroline Benton, who was raised in Somerset, England, but moved to France some dozen years ago. There she converted a haunted watermill into a holiday home which she runs together with her partner, while simultaneously pursuing her writing career. Her novel *The Path of the Dead* was published in the United States by Carroll & Graf Publishers in 2006. We have two more of her stories in the pipeline. ¶

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invite, intending to claim it had been lost in the post, but Mouse had got wind of the party anyway and collared Dick in the pub. Like Dick was going to tell her she couldn't come!

He was over there now, along with Pete and several of the other husbands, grinning like an idiot every time she opened her mouth. And she wasn't the only one watching. Laura had been glaring in their direction for the past half-hour, and now Sally was looking daggers.

Jilly went to the drinks table and poured herself another gin. It was so unfair. She'd spent months planning this party—choosing the food, searching magazines for ideas for decorations, not to mention the endless shopping trips to town—and last night, when she'd hung the final glass ball on the tree and Dick had switched on the lights, she knew it had all been worthwhile. The silver-and-white theme had paid off; her reputation would be upheld. She'd had every reason to believe it would be the best party ever. Yet now . . .

"Jilly?"

She spun around. "Oh, hi, Laura. Everything okay?"

"Er, not exactly." Laura bit her lip. "Sorry to be a party-pooper but we're going to call it a day."

Jilly gaped. "You mean go home? But you *can't!* It's not even midnight. The party's hardly started—"

"I know. I'm sorry. But I've got a foul headache. To be honest, I almost didn't come, but I thought maybe once I was here . . ."

"Oh, why didn't you say!" Jilly beamed with relief. "I'll fetch you some painkillers. Half an hour and you'll be fine. Once you get dancing . . ."

But Laura was shaking her head. "Not tonight, Jilly. Sorry. Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks. Great party."

Jilly managed a smile. "Well, if you're sure. Let's hope you feel better in the morning. Will, er, Roger be coming back?"

Laura glanced at her husband, who was waiting morosely by the door, then across at Mouse. "I don't think so, Jilly. Say goodbye to Dick for us."

Jilly cast an eye over the room, praying the other guests hadn't seen them leave. Early exits had a way of escalating. Damn the woman, she thought, as Mouse's laughter rose above the music. Headache be damned: She knew the true reason behind Laura's early departure.

It was unthinkable for anyone to leave their parties before midnight. Normally they broke up around three. Most of the guests lived on the estate and could walk to their respective homes, and no driving meant the booze could flow freely. The early hours were always the best time, when people relaxed and inhibitions flew out the window; they'd had some pretty riotous times and no mistake! Not that anyone ever disgraced themselves—she wouldn't stand for that—but that didn't mean they didn't have fun. And there'd never been any unpleasantness—until last year, when Mouse had made that gibe at Sal.

At the time she'd blamed it on the drink—Mouse Conniston always knocked it back—though the other three had been less charitable. "She knew what she was doing, all right!" Stephanie had declared the following morning, and the other two Glories had nodded.

Glories. That's what the four women called themselves. Morning Glories, to be exact, a name coined jokingly by Laura because of their frequent morning coffee

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get-togethers. They met two or three times a week in each other's homes, to catch up on gossip and sound off about whatever was getting them down, more often than not their husbands. Sal often joked it was what kept them sane. Except recently, what was mostly getting them down was Mouse.

And now she'd done it again, shown Sally up in front of the guests, and caused another of her friends to leave. Jilly stared at the source of the problem and seethed.

She had long ago decided Mouse Conniston was bad news—especially as, unlike Sally, she knew exactly what men saw in her. The woman had a spark, an infectious vitality, that set her apart from the crowd and drew men like bees towards honey. She might not be the most beautiful flower in the garden, but there was no denying she had the brightest petals and the most powerful scent.

She was using it now, pumping out the pheromones, clamped into a red velvet dress that made her look like a stripagram female Santa. Santa *Claws*—yes, that was a good name. Blood red claws, impeccably manicured, sharpened and ready to sink into someone else's husband.

Well, not at her party, she didn't!

She caught Dick's eye and jerked her head for him to join her. He muttered something to the others and ambled across.

"What's up?"

"Don't you think you should break that up?"

"Break what up?"

"The Mouse Conniston fan club."

"Oh, for Christ's sake . . ."

"Keep your voice down," Jilly hissed. "I'm serious. The wives are getting miffed. Did you know Laura's gone home?"

"Yeah, and dragged poor Rog with her."

"*Poor* Rog? If he hadn't spent the whole time flirting . . ."

"It's a *party,* Jilly! People are *meant* to flirt."

"Not the entire evening!"

"Oh, for God's sake! Loosen up, will you?"

Jilly stared after him open-mouthed. What the hell was happening to everyone? Dick *never* spoke to her like that, *never.* He was one of the most laid-back people she knew, the big guy with the big heart, mindful of others, always ready with a smile and a cheerful word. When they had arguments it was she who ranted and raved, Dick rarely raised his voice. Just waited until she calmed down, then gave her a big hug, and they invariably ended up laughing. She was the envy of the other Glories in that respect, and Sally often claimed Dick was too good to be true.

Jilly frowned. Had she taken him too much for granted?

Her hand tightened on her glass as Mouse's laughter rang out again. More heads were turning. Well, if Dick wouldn't do anything, she would! Fixing a smile on her face, she marched across the room, barged through the husbands, and began to talk to Mouse.

The Glories had met six years before, when they moved into the newly built Clairbrook estate. A prestigious development (according to the builders) of so-called "elite homes," the Clairbrook was one of many that, with the never-ending demand for housing, had sprung up on the edge of the small town. It had spread

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like a virus, engulfing everything that stood in its path, including three Victorian villas that until then had stood in glorious isolation amongst lush pasture and quiet lanes. The owners of the villas, far from happy with the change, had one by one moved out, including, some eighteen months before, the third-generation owners of The Firs. Mouse Conniston had moved in.

"What's she want a big place like that for?" Sally had asked at the time, at a coffee morning at Jilly's. "How can she afford it with no husband and no job?"

"How do you know she doesn't have a job?" Laura asked.

"I can see her drive from the bedroom window. Her car's there during the day."

"Actually, she works at home," Stephanie informed them. Her house was next-door. "I saw her last night and she invited me in for a drink. Apparently she designs Web sites."

"Doesn't everyone!" Sally muttered, pulling a face. "Did she show you any of her work?"

"She did, as a matter of fact. Looked quite impressive."

"What about the house?" Jilly asked anxiously.

"I only saw the kitchen."

"And?"

"She's had the whole thing redone. It's stunning."

"*Seriously?*" Jilly glanced around at her own, not wanting to be outshone.

"Seriously. Ask her round for a drink, then she'll invite you back and you can see for yourself."

So Jilly had. And had quickly come to regret it.

Almost all the homes on the Clairbrook Estate were owned by couples, most, like the Glories, with children. A single woman was a novelty. But a novelty soon fades when the woman turns out to be flirtatious, charismatic, and predatory. As Sally said a few months later, two and one make three and everyone knows where three in a marriage can lead.

She said a whole lot more at their first meeting following the party. The runup to Christmas was making mornings impossible, so the Glories had grabbed a quick half-hour at Laura's late in the afternoon. Most of the talk had been about Mouse.

"Well, I've had her up to here," Sally declared when the postmortem was over. "She's a total bitch. You need eyes in the back of your head since she arrived. Only the other day . . ." She broke off, gave a sheepish smile. "No, I'm too ashamed to admit it."

"Go on!" the others chorused.

"Well . . . it's nothing, really. Just that the other day, when Pete phoned to say he'd be late, I looked out the window to see if her car was still there."

"Was it?" Laura asked.

"Yes! But that's not the point. It's the fact that I *needed* to look. She's caused doubts where before there weren't any, and that's not good."

"It takes two, Sal," Stephanie pointed out. "Pete's not that stupid. Why not mention it to him if you're worried and—"

"Are you crazy? This is *Pete* we're talking about. Anyway, he'd just tell me I was imagining it." She frowned. "Like I haven't seen the eye contact that goes on."

"She brings out the alpha male," Jilly murmured.

"Well, she can bring out someone else's! Anyway, it's easy for you, Steph. Ian wasn't following her round with his tongue hanging out. He's the only one of the

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bunch who seems immune."

"I wish Roger was," muttered Laura. "He's still sulking because I dragged him away. It's not like him to sulk."

"And it's not like Dick to lose his temper," said Jilly.

"*Dick lost his temper?*"

"This morning. We actually had a row."

"I rest my case." Sally folded her arms and sat back in the chair. "Question is, what are we going to do about it?"

They looked from one to the other.

"Well, I doubt it would be much use talking to her," Laura said. "She'd laugh in our faces. Probably believes if we can't hang on to our men it's our own fault."

"She could be right," Jilly murmured, but lucky for her the others didn't hear.

"We could try driving her away." Sal reached across the table for the chocolates. "Make life so unbearable she leaves of her own accord. Oh, who's pigged all the strawberry creams . . . ?"

"I suppose we could . . . inconvenience her in some way," agreed Laura. "When's she leaving for Scotland, Steph?"

"Two days' time. I'm looking after her cat."

"Know where she's staying?"

"A hotel in Glenshee. It's a skiing holiday for singles."

"Some bloke's in for a good time, then," Sal sniggered. "Rumpy-pumpy on the piste. Think we should phone up and cancel?"

"And have her come back here? I don't think so, Sal." Laura turned to Steph. "Does that mean you have a key?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"We could trash the place while she's away!" Sal grinned.

Laura rolled her eyes.

"Wipe her computer?"

"Like any of us would know how."

"Hell, why don't we just cut her brake pipes!"

Stephanie laughed. "Laura said inconvenience her, not kill her! Anyway, she's going by train."

"She has to get to the station."

"She's taking a taxi." Stephanie glanced at her watch. "Heavens, I must go, otherwise I won't be there when the kids arrive. But look on the bright side, Sal," she added, pushing back her chair. "She's going for ten days. You'll be without her for the whole of Christmas and New Year."

"I'd prefer to be without her permanently," Sally muttered, picking up her bag.

Stephanie arrived home minutes before her two daughters, who had been playing with a neighbour's children. She poured them glasses of juice and settled them in front of the television, then started on the supper. Something quick tonight, she still had masses to do. She took a pizza from the freezer. Not the healthiest fare for growing children, but there'd be plenty of good wholesome food in the coming days.

Shortly before six, the telephone rang. Stephanie wasn't surprised; it wasn't only women caught up in the Christmas rush. Ian had end-of-year deadlines to meet and this year, for the first time, was being forced to work late. Proof the business was doing well, he assured her: a cause for celebration, not complaint.

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She told him she would expect him when she saw him and returned to the kitchen.

She ate supper alone with the children. They were overexcited and tired: As soon as they had finished, she would try to get them to bed. A car started up in the drive next-door.

"That's Mouse's car," said Emma, pushing a piece of mushroom around her plate. "I expect she's going to a party."

"Why should she be going to a party?" asked her older sister, Lucy.

"She always *looks* like she's going to a party."

"That's 'cause she's tarted up."

"*Lucy!*" Stephanie banged the table.

"What? Sally says . . ."

"I don't care what Sally says!" God, she was beginning to feel frayed. "Are you going to eat that, Emma?"

Emma forked the mushroom into her mouth and pulled a face. "Why's she called Mouse, Mum?"

"I've no idea."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"It's none of my business." Actually she already had, and had got a that's-for-me-to-know-and-you-to-find-out smirk for her trouble. "Look, if you're not going to eat that, Emma, take your plate to the sink. And then go up for your bath."

"It's too *early* . . ."

"No arguments! I've got lots to do tonight."

Emma started to protest, then thought better of it. "Stupid name!" she muttered as she slid from the chair.

Stephanie sat at the table wrapping yet more presents. She had a headache starting—hardly surprising given all the fuss. If it wasn't for the girls, she'd dispense with Christmas altogether and take off for pastures new. Like Mouse. Not Scotland, though, not in winter. Ian had family in Scotland but she always insisted on visiting in the warmer months. She didn't like snow.

It was snowing now. She could see it through the uncurtained window. Small feathery flakes drifting aimlessly to earth like they had all the time in the world. She wished *she* had, but unlike the snow, her life seemed to be speeding up, whizzing past faster and faster as the years progressed. It seemed like only yesterday it was last Christmas, a few yesterdays before that the children were born. And not so many yesterdays since she'd been a slim young girl leaving college and beginning her career in IT. A promising career: She'd had a natural aptitude. But then she'd met Ian, fallen in love, got married, had children, and the rest was history.

She'd almost said something earlier when one of the Glories—Laura, was it?—claimed none of them could wipe Mouse's computer. *She* could. Wipe it, reprogram it, whatever took her fancy. The others forgot that, to them she was just a wife and mother. So easy to make assumptions. So easy to forget.

A cat jumped onto the window sill and miaowed, a big bruiser of a cat with tiger stripes and wide cheeks. Mouse's cat.

"Go home, Tom," she called. "I'm sure your mistress will be back soon."

The cat miaowed again and pawed at the window, leaving muddy streaks on the glass.

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"Oh, for heaven's sake. . . ." Why on earth didn't Mouse fit a cat flap?

She jumped up and grabbed her coat. She might as well let him in, she'd be doing it all the time while Mouse was away. Besides, the poor animal was probably frozen.

She grabbed the torch and took the spare key from the cupboard. "Hang on, Tom," she called, and let herself out.

The ground was covered in a thin layer of white dust. The snow was pitching. Tom came running up miaowing, then ran ahead, as if to show her the way through the hedge. She pushed through, walked along the side of the house, and unlocked the back door. Tom was in like a flash, and after a moment's hesitation Stephanie followed. The cat was a thief, she told herself. It was only fair to check no food had been left out.

She needn't have worried. The worktops were pristine. The only food was in a bowl on the floor. Tom made a beeline for it and began to tuck in, making low growly noises to show his approval. Stephanie watched him for a moment, smiling, then allowed herself to look enviously around.

The kitchen was a dream, simple yet stylish, in perfect keeping with the house. And so *tidy*—not cluttered up with toys, paints, scissors, and tubes of glitter like her own. In the far corner was a pretty pine desk on which sat Mouse's laptop. Stephanie stared at it. These days, a person's entire life was on a computer, every detail of their day-to-day existence. Contained within that little black box would be reminders, spreadsheets, details of finances, addresses of clients, names of friends . . .

Friends?

Stephanie froze. Her heart began to race. She glanced towards the window.

A second later, hardly able to believe what she was doing, she wandered across, took a deep breath, and raised the lid.

Wipe it? Reprogram it?

Oh no.

Ears pricked for the sound of a car, she settled into the chair, took another deep breath, and switched on.

It didn't take her long to find her way around. Or to get into Mouse's e-mails. Mouse had protected them with a password but Stephanie guessed it at the fourth try. *Jerry*—what else?

All her correspondence was there, both business and private, but it was the private ones that interested Steph. Especially the ones that began "Hi, Big Man."

A singles holiday it might be, but for some of the time Mouse would apparently have company. "Big Man" was to join her. And what delights she was promising him. There would be plenty of rumpy-pumpy all right—après-ski, pre-, and during, from the sound of it. Whoever Big Man was, he must have been positively panting when the e-mails arrived.

The address wasn't one she knew, but that meant nothing. Anyone can have more than one address. She read through the remainder, read a few again, then switched off and carefully closed the lid.

Tom was on the worktop when she stood up, lazily licking his paws.

"Not a word!" she whispered, and let herself out.

Ian returned shortly after eleven, looking exhausted.

"Have you eaten?" she asked.

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He nodded. "Grabbed a takeaway. Wouldn't mind a coffee, though."

"It'll keep you awake."

"Not tonight."

She made coffee for Ian, a Horlicks for herself, and curled up beside him on the sofa. "Did you get everything finished?"

"Most. Not all. We're having trouble with the McBain contract. Looks like I'll have to go up there."

"*To Scotland?* When?"

"Before New Year. I can't let it run on." He yawned. "Nuisance, I know, but it'll only be for a couple of days. And look on the bright side. I can visit the family."

"Will you have time?"

"I'll make time, even if it means staying an extra night." He tossed back the last of the coffee. "Better get to bed. You coming?"

"In a minute," Stephanie said. "Still a few things to do."

"Well, don't be late."

She carried the mugs to the kitchen and put them in the dishwasher, like an automaton wiped work surfaces and tidied things away. The fears that had been plaguing her for the past month had been confirmed, and it felt worse than she'd imagined—far, far worse. She leaned over the sink and retched.

The affair, she thought, must have begun in the summer—at least, that's when Ian's trips away had begun. But it wasn't until November that she'd realised they coincided with her feeding the cat. A quick check through her diary had confirmed it. The night she'd fed Tom in September, Ian had been in Kent. The weekend in October, he'd spent a night in Oxford. In November it was midweek, a Wednesday and Thursday. On the Wednesday, Ian had stayed over in Bath.

At first she'd told herself it was coincidence (there had been a couple of dates that didn't coincide), but when the number of evenings he spent at work increased, so did her misgivings. Now, when he phoned, she found herself listening for Mouse's car—and too often was rewarded.

Yet even then she found it hard to believe. They seemed such an unlikely couple. If Mouse had sent Tom to a cattery would she ever have caught on?

Her first thought had been to confront him. Then she decided to sit it out. The last thing she wanted to do was force his hand. Too many marriages ended in divorce and she was damned if she would become another statistic. *Her* children weren't going to come from a broken home. No, however much she hated it, she would pretend ignorance. Mouse would soon get bored, she told herself. Give it time and the affair would fizzle out.

And she'd continued to believe it until she read the e-mails. "Counting the days till we're together all the time," Mouse had written in one, and "... when you tell her after Christmas ..." in another. Well, Stephanie wasn't going to simply sit around and wait to be told. The time had come for action.

She sat down at the table and reached for her notebook. It contained her lists—shopping lists, Christmas-card lists, lists of things to buy. Turning to a fresh page, she closed her eyes. The seed of an idea was germinating. It would take courage, a whole *mountain* of it—but what price risk when her family was at stake? Think of the children ...

An age later, hands shaking, she picked up a pen and wrote, *Order taxi.*

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Next morning it was still snowing. Good. Everyone knew she hated driving in snow. She ordered the taxi for nine-thirty the following morning.

She had just put down the phone when the doorbell rang. Jilly was on the step, looking like death, her eyes wild.

"Are the girls in?" she demanded before Steph could speak.

"No, they've gone . . ."

"Good." She brushed past her and into the kitchen.

"You look like you need a coffee," Steph said.

"Like hell! Got any gin?"

"At ten in the morning? Whatever's wrong?"

"*Dick's* what's wrong! Oh Steph . . ."

Stephanie forced her friend into a chair, fetched the bottle, and sloshed some into a glass. "Tell me what's happened," she said, sitting beside her. "Slowly."

Jilly nodded. "Yesterday . . ." She paused to gulp back the gin. "Yesterday Dick came home from work early. He was there when I got back from Laura's. On the phone. He obviously didn't hear me come in. I was about to say hello when . . ." She screwed up her eyes. "It was Mouse, Steph. He was talking to Mouse. She and Dick are having an affair."

"*What?*"

"I know. I can't believe it either."

"But that's impossible . . ."

"Is it? You didn't hear him! They were talking about this trip to Scotland and—"

"But he can't be!" Stephanie cut in. "You must have misheard. Had he said anything to you about going away?"

"Nothing. Which made *me* wonder if I'd got it wrong. So to make sure, I told him I'd booked tickets for the theatre on the twenty-ninth. And that's when he owned up."

"He admitted they're having an affair?"

"Don't be daft! That he has to go away. Claims he has to be in Birmingham on the twenty-eighth, probably for a couple of days. But what he *really* means is he's off for a cosy couple of nights in Glenshee with that . . . God, and there's me thinking she was seeing Roger."

"*Roger!*"

"Didn't you know? They've been seen together a couple of times in the pub. Why d'you think Laura dragged him away from the party?"

"I thought she had a headache—"

"God, you're so naive, Steph! Anyway, why didn't Dick tell me he was going away if it's all so innocent?"

"Did you ask him?"

Jilly shrugged. "He *claims* he was leaving it till the last minute. So as not to ruin Christmas."

Stephanie smiled. "Sounds like Dick."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that he's always so thoughtful . . ."

Jilly shot to her feet. "I might have known *you* wouldn't understand, you with the perfect husband. Well, she's not having mine! Over my dead body—or hers, if it comes to that."

"*Jilly . . .*"

But Jilly had gone, sweeping out of the house and slamming the door.

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Stephanie slumped back in the chair and sighed. *Damn* Mouse Conniston, she thought angrily. How could one woman cause so much anguish?

Ian was working late again, which was just as well. Stephanie thought this time it was genuine. Somehow she managed to cook dinner and persuade the girls to bed. Outwardly she appeared calm (she hoped), but her insides were in turmoil, her heart threatening to leave her body. Would she be able to go through with it?

The plan, she congratulated herself, was ingenious and would begin tonight, as soon as she was sure the girls were asleep. She would slip out unnoticed and call on Mouse, supposedly to check last-minute details, and inevitably Mouse would offer her a drink (she always did), whereupon Stephanie would ask for red wine. As Mouse only ever drank white, it would mean a trip to the cellar, as on previous occasions, and while she was down there—this was the most difficult part—Stephanie would close and lock the door. Later, when it was . . . all over, she would unlock it again, carefully unscrew the doorknob, and let it fall on the floor. The other section she would push through. It would look as if Mouse had gone into the cellar, the door had swung shut, and when she'd tried to get out again the knob had come loose in her hand. She would, to all intents and purposes, have locked herself in.

Next, Stephanie would doctor the computer and remove the e-mails to Big Man. The death must look like an accident: She didn't want the police to find a possible motive for foul play when they finally arrived. And all that left was the taxi.

The taxi had been a tricky one. Mouse had ordered it for nine-fifteen, and who knew what might happen if she didn't appear. The driver might start knocking on doors to check the address, which could lead to some awkward enquiries. So Stephanie had ordered one for herself for nine-thirty. She wouldn't take it, of course, she'd take the first one, and if her own driver started calling on neighbours she would later laugh it off and say they must have sent two. Things were always hectic around Christmastime and no one would be surprised if the firm made a mistake.

There was a faint chance the hotel might make enquiries when Mouse didn't show, but Stephanie doubted it. They'd be far too busy. And Ian certainly wouldn't. So it would be up to her to call the police when Mouse didn't come home as planned. After she'd phoned the hotel, of course, to see if Mouse was still there—and been suitably shocked to discover she'd never arrived.

Yes, the plan was ingenious all right. Oh, Mouse would scream and knock when she was first shut in, but who would hear her? The walls were too thick for her to be heard outside, and Stephanie was the only one with a key. "I never heard a thing," she would swear when questioned. "She couldn't have been knocking while I was inside."

Stephanie shuddered. Until now she'd tried not to think what would actually *happen* to Mouse, but suddenly she could picture it all too well. Trapped in the darkness, frozen to the bone. Would she scratch at the door until her fingers bled?

And what would finally kill her—the cold? Starvation? Thirst? Whatever it was, her death would be hideous—painful and drawn-out. A premature burial, in a coffin the size of a room.

Nausea rose in Stephanie's throat and her heart began to pound. She sank

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onto a chair and buried her face in her hands. Who was she kidding? Of *course* she couldn't go through with it. She wasn't a *murderer,* for heaven's sake. . . .

But Mouse would go through with it. At nine-fifteen tomorrow, the taxi would arrive and whisk her off to the station. And then, a few days later . . .

Stephanie leapt to her feet. She might not be able to kill Mouse, but she could at least confront her. She'd beg her to leave Ian alone, plead with her—hell, she'd even go down on her knees. Anything to keep a father for her children.

And what's more, she'd do it now, before she lost her nerve. She grabbed the torch and, without stopping to pull on a coat, let herself out.

It had snowed quite heavily during the day and a frost was making the ground treacherous. Stephanie picked her way carefully along the path. Climbing through the hedge, she dropped the torch, and when it hit the ground the light went out. Cursing, she crouched down and groped around, pausing when she heard a noise. It sounded like Mouse's back door closing. Sure enough, a figure was coming towards her along the side of the house, swathed from head to foot in something dark.

"Mouse?" she called.

The figure halted, spun around, and hurried back the way it had come.

Strange, Stephanie thought.

Finally she located the torch, shook it to make it work, and made her way to the door. Had whoever it was gone back inside? She knocked loudly, and when she got no response tried again. Finally, in desperation, she turned the knob and to her surprise the door swung inwards. What had happened to the safety chain?

"Hello?" she called, stepping inside. "Mouse?"

The only reply was a miaow.

"Hello, Tom," she said. "Is your—owner at home?" She couldn't bring herself to say the word mistress.

Tom ran towards the kitchen.

Stephanie followed. The lights were on, but the room was empty. She frowned. A wineglass was lying on its side on the worktop and another had shattered on the floor. Quickly she scooped Tom up and put him outside, afraid he might cut his paws on the glass.

"*Mouse!*" she called more loudly when she came back in. *"Where are you?"*

She crossed the kitchen and opened the door to the hall. Her stomach gave a lurch. The door to the cellar was open.

Cautiously she moved towards it. The cellar was in darkness. "Mouse?" she called hesitantly, flicking on the torch and shining it down. Her hand shot to her mouth.

She didn't need to go down to know Mouse was dead. Her body was sprawled on the ground, the eyes wide open and staring. Blood had run from a wound on her head. Judging by her position and the angle of her neck, she must have fallen sideways from the second or third step, cracking her head on the wine rack on the way down.

Fallen?

Stephanie staggered back against the wall and closed her eyes.

Her mind was reeling. She ought to phone the police. But what would they find when they got there?

And who was the woman she'd seen leaving the house? She hadn't recognised her, true, yet she felt sure it was a woman. Suppose it was Jilly? Or one of the

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other Glories? Accidentally or otherwise putting into practice what she'd been unable to do . . .

She remembered the glass on the kitchen floor, the e-mails. The crime team would have a field day. Heaven only knew what might come out. Families would suffer. Children. Even in death, Mouse would continue to destroy.

Slowly Stephanie pushed herself from the wall. Her mind was made up. Whoever the woman was, she had done her a favour. Besides, why let a good plan go to waste?

She returned to the kitchen, pulled on some rubber gloves she found under the sink, and collected up the glass. She couldn't tip it in the bin—she'd watched enough police dramas to know it might hold fingerprints—so instead she tipped it into a bag to take away. Next she wiped the worktops and the handles on the hall door. The cellar door she left open. She would have no cause to enter the hall while looking after Tom.

Finally she sat at the computer and removed the incriminating e-mails. She polished the keys and anything else she might have touched, then stood up and took a final look around. Had she forgotten anything?

Ah yes . . .

She took a tin from the fridge, filled Tom's bowl, and put it on the floor.

She was ready and waiting next morning when the taxi arrived to take Mouse to the station.

"You're early," she told the driver when she went rushing out. "Or is my watch slow?"

"Must be your watch," he said. "I'm bang on time."

She didn't argue.

And nor did he when, coming into town, she asked to be dropped at the shopping centre. It didn't matter to him where she went as long as he got his fare.

Late on Christmas Eve the snow began to fall more heavily. "Looks like we're going to get that white Christmas," Ian said, peering around the curtains. "Fancy building a snowman tomorrow, girls?"

"Yes please!" they shouted in unison.

Ian laughed and came back to the sofa. "By the way," he told Stephanie, "one good bit of news. I don't need to go to Scotland."

"*What?*" She spun round to face him.

"Nope, the late nights paid off. Everything's finished. I even sorted the McBain—Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I . . ."

"Why are you shaking, Mum?" Emma asked.

"Am I?" She gave a little laugh. "Must be tiredness. And you should be in bed, Emma. If you're not asleep when Santa comes, he won't leave you any presents, isn't that right, Lucy?"

Lucy nodded and leaned towards her sister.

" *'Twas the night before Christmas,"* she whispered, *"and all through the house, Not a creature was stirring, not even a MOUSE!"*

On the last word she pounced and Emma cried out. Lucy began to laugh.

"Not even a Mouse . . ." Stephanie echoed and suddenly she was laughing too. Louder . . . and louder . . . and louder . . . ●

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Slow Burn

by Simon Brett

Murder rates always rise during the Christmas holiday period, and Greg Lincoln was determined to add to them. Just by one. The additional statistic would be his wife Shelley.

It's not on Christmas Day itself that the bulk of the murders happen. Most relationships can survive the enforced bonhomie for sixteen waking hours (particularly when some are spent comatose in front of bland television). It's in the days afterwards, the inert sag between Christmas and New Year, that's when people turn homicidal.

The Lincolns had married because Greg had been attracted to Shelley's money, and Shelley had been attracted to . . . Actually, Greg never knew exactly what it was in his character that had attracted her. He had reasonably good looks and suave manners, but even he recognised that he had no moral qualities whatsoever. Still, Shelley, a good Catholic girl, had agreed to marry him. Maybe he was the only man who had ever asked her. The fact had to be faced, she wasn't that pretty. But she was beautifully rich.

She was also rather mousey, which suited Greg very well. He'd never wanted a wife who would be too assertive, or who might question the lifestyle choices he had made. In this sense, Shelley was perfect. She never suggested—as some wives might have done—that perhaps he ought to do some work and thereby make a contribution to their mutual finances. Nor did she show unhealthy curiosity as to how he spent his time away from home. She accepted his mumbled excuses about "going off to play a round of golf" without ever wondering why the golf bag in the boot of his BMW still looked as fresh as when it came out of the shop. Shelley's lack of curiosity was convenient, as it was years since Greg had stepped inside a golf club. And the only "playing around" he did was in the bedrooms of bored Sussex housewives.

Perhaps, he sometimes idly wondered, Shelley was unsuspicious simply because she was so preoccupied with her two obsessions. The first of these was her Catholic faith. To Greg, who had never believed in anything except for his own superiority, this was no more than a puzzling eccentricity. Shelley's sec-

Simon Brett's latest novel in a series set in the fictional retirement community of Fethering, on England's southeast coast, is *Blood at the Bookies* (Five Star Press, August 2008). The ninth entry in a charming classical whodunit series, it was described in *Publishers Weekly*'s recent review as "sure to please longtime fans." Mr. Brett is also the creator of the Charles Paris and Mrs. Pargeter series of mystery novels. We'll have another of his clever non-series stories for you later this year.

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ond obsession he found equally inexplicable. *Gardening*. Greg Lincoln's lips could not shape the word without an expression of contempt. To him one plant looked much like another, and none of them was very interesting. But to Shelley, her inheritance from her parents, not Lovelock Manor itself but the garden surrounding it, was her raison d'être. She was never happier than when spending long hours with her gardener Dan in his shed, discussing their plans for the forthcoming season.

Though unable to understand his wife's horticultural obsession, Greg concluded with a mental shrug that it didn't do any harm. And, so long as the garden kept her from taking too much interest in his activities, it was all fine by him.

So that was the Lincolns' marriage, no better and probably no worse than many another. Greg had announced early on that he didn't want to have children, a decision that Shelley, though it challenged her Catholic principles, had greeted with characteristic meekness. They still had occasional sexual encounters, on days when Greg hadn't managed to find a convenient bored housewife, but with decreasing frequency. Whether Shelley enjoyed these interludes, or regretted their dwindling away, Greg had no idea.

And so their marriage rubbed along. And might have rubbed along for a good many years, but for one thing.

Greg Lincoln fell in love.

It was unwished-for, it was inconvenient, but it was a fact. Greg, who had never regarded women as more than means of gratification, had fallen head-over-heels in love.

Inevitably, the woman he fell for was as tough and cynical as he was. Vicki Talbot. They'd met at a pre-Christmas drinks party. She had had in tow a husband called Alan, in whom she clearly took as little interest as Greg did in Shelley. A few drinks and a quiet chat in a kitchen sticky with mulled wine led to an agreement to meet the following afternoon for what both knew would be a sexual encounter. Like Greg, Vicki showed no coyness. She had no illusions that there might be anything romantic involved, while Greg looked forward to carving another notch on his metaphorical bedpost, before moving on to his next conquest.

And yet, from the moment he had made love to Vicki Talbot, he could not eradicate her image from his mind. At the age of forty-six, Greg Lincoln, hard-bitten, self-serving Greg Lincoln, had fallen calamitously in love. Not the kind of warm love that might make him feel good about himself, but an obsessive, jealous love, over which he had no control. Thoughts of what Vicki might be doing when he was not with her burned like hot wires through his brain. The idea of anyone else just being in her company, let alone touching her . . . He tried to force his mind away from the images that tortured him, but to no avail. Greg Lincoln was hooked.

The agony had been increased by the fact that, after a series of torrid, snatched encounters running up to the holidays, he'd actually had to meet Vicki socially on Boxing Day. A drinks party given by mutual friends, an occasion of jaded bonhomie, no one really yet ready for another celebration after the excesses of Christmas Day itself. It was the kind of occasion at which Greg could normally excel, drinking too much, patronising Shelley, getting cheap laughs from his less quick-witted friends.

But at this drinks party he was like a coiled spring, his mental radar aware

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only of where Vicki was standing, who she was talking to, who placed a casual hand on her arm. He thought he would explode if he couldn't get just a moment alone with her. The prospect of their reaching the end of the party, of Vicki being whisked away by the odious Alan with nothing more than a communal wave and wishes for "A Happy New Year," was more than Greg could bear.

There were moments at the party when he thought Vicki was feeling the same pressure. At times he thought he could read an undercurrent of anguish in her jokey social manner, but he couldn't be sure. Though it had never bothered him much before, he was brought up hard against the impossibility of knowing what went on inside a woman's mind.

They did get their snatched moment, ironically in the kitchen, mirroring their first fatal encounter.

"I need you," Greg hissed in desperation. "I have to be with you all the time."

"Nice idea," said Vicki, in a manner that sounded sincere, "but there is a problem."

"What? There's no problem we can't get round."

"Shelley. You can't be with me all the time if Shelley's on the scene."

"It's the same with you and Alan."

"No," she said contemptuously. "I only stay with Alan because I have expensive tastes, and he can afford to cater to them. With you and Shelley it's different."

"What do you mean?"

Her grayish-blue eyes found his. "I mean that you and I can't be together unless Shelley is out of the equation."

Further intimate conversation was prevented by the entrance of a very drunk Alan. "You two having a secret snog, are you?" he asked with a guffaw that cut through Greg like a serrated blade.

For the next twenty-four hours, he kept trying to analyse the four words Vicki had spoken. "Out of the equation." What did they mean? That he should leave Shelley? He could do that readily enough. That he should divorce her? Shelley's Catholicism might make that more difficult, but it was not insoluble.

Greg Lincoln, however, knew Vicki had meant more than that. Coming so close to the reference to her expensive tastes, there was only one conclusion that could be reached. Greg had no money of his own. Divorce from Shelley would leave him virtually penniless. But were Shelley to die, he would inherit all of her estate. At the start of their marriage they had made wills, each naming the other as sole beneficiary. All at once the meaning of the phrase "out of the equation" became blindingly clear.

Once he had decided to murder his wife, Greg Lincoln felt a lot calmer. And he started to think in a very logical way.

The most important consideration was that Shelley's death should look like an accident. And ideally should happen while her husband was absent from Lovelock Manor. His plans would be ruined by any suspicion attaching to himself. Shelley would have to die, Greg would have to play the grieving widower for a suitable length of time (or at least till probate on the estate was sorted out), and then he could be with Vicki Talbot forever.

He spent most of Boxing Day evening striding restlessly around Lovelock Manor, assessing various forms of domestic accident. Rewired electrical booby-traps, loosened carpets on the stairs, combustible gas leaks in the kitchen . . . he contemplated them all, but none promised the guarantee of success. And many would put him too near for safety to the scene of the crime.

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Through the night too he lay sleepless, his mind churning over other ways of eliminating the woman who lay softly sleeping beside him. And it was only as the gleamings of a truculent winter dawn could be seen though a crack in the bedroom curtains that Greg Lincoln's great idea came to him.

Rather than in the house, it would be much easier to engineer his wife's death in the garden.

At lunch the following day, Shelley was surprised when, for the first time in their relationship, Greg showed some interest in her hobby. "Will you be doing gardening stuff over the next few days?" he asked casually.

"Yes, I'll hope to," his wife replied. "Dan'll be back at work tomorrow, and there's a lot we need to do."

"I'm sure there is," he replied with an uncharacteristically generous smile. "Planting seeds and things . . . ?"

"More planning this time of year."

"You and Dan in a huddle in the shed?"

"Yes, a bit cold to be outside too much."

"I'm sure. I was just interested, Shelley . . ."

"Yes, Greg?" There was a pathetic hopefulness in her look. Was her husband finally getting interested in gardening?

" . . . because I've got a golf thing on tomorrow, so I won't be here."

"Ah." She looked crestfallen.

"But you're here today, are you, Shelley?" She nodded. Greg smiled and took an envelope out of his pocket. "Unless, of course, you decide to go off and spend these . . . ?"

A hundred pounds' worth of gardening tokens, which he had been out to buy that morning. There was a childlike gleam of excitement in her eye as she took the present. For Shelley, the tokens represented the possibility that her husband might finally be showing some interest in her life. For Greg, they were a means of getting his wife away from Lovelock Manor while he devised a way of ending that life.

Predictably, she went straight off to a garden centre. Greg Lincoln made sure that her car was out of sight before moving to explore what was new territory for him, the garden of Lovelock Manor. As he pottered around, his mind catalogued potential murder methods. Poisoning, yes . . . there must be plenty of poison in gardens. Commercially available mixtures to kill off weeds and insects. But how much would be needed to kill a healthy woman in her forties? And, more importantly, how could she be persuaded to swallow the stuff . . . ? In a manner that would appear to be accidental . . . ?

Then again, there was hazardous garden equipment. Greg had hazy recollections from his school days of reading books in which horny-handed sons of the soil suffered terrible injuries from sickles and scythes. Then, of course, farmers kept getting trapped under tractors. And didn't people die in grain silos?

He realised his fantasies were getting a little out of hand, and decided to curb them until he had actually assessed the possibilities offered by the garden shed.

So far as he could recollect, Greg Lincoln had never been inside the place. Lovelock Manor had come as part of the package with Shelley, and he'd had no curiosity as to what happened outside the house itself. So walking down the path to the shed was a new experience. There had been rain on Boxing Day, the red bricks underfoot were slippery and Greg winced at the idea of getting slime on

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his tasselled loafers. He passed an almost-dead bonfire from which tendrils of smoke fought their way up though the mist. Amazing how long some things burned for. Dan, the gardener, who must have lit the fire, hadn't been to work since the day before Christmas Eve.

Greg was surprised to find how spacious the interior of the shed was. Also how neat and well-maintained. He had never taken much interest in Dan. A muscle-bound young man probably around thirty, the gardener seemed to be a man of few words. (That was to say that Greg had never heard many words from him; then again, he'd never addressed many to the young man, either.) But the neatly aligned hanging spades, forks, hoes, rakes, and other garden implements suggested a tidy mind, which was confirmed by the carefully labelled pots, boxes, and jars on the benches that ran below the small windows. The minimal light these gave was further diminished by creepers growing outside, and Greg was not surprised to see that Dan had a large fat candle in a holder. Nor that there was a lighter lying on the bench beside it.

There was no electricity running to the shed, but the space was surprisingly snug. Two dilapidated armchairs gathered round a butane-gas heater, and a sofa-bed slumped against one wall. A small butane-gas stove suggested Dan could keep himself supplied with hot drinks and snacks. There was a small cabinet containing instant coffee, UHT milk, sugar, a biscuit tin.

Greg Lincoln only vaguely took in these details. What his mind focused on was the predominant smell inside the shed. Petrol.

The odour emanated from a large fuel can, and from the mower, chainsaw, and strimmer which had been filled from it. Greg smiled at his own good fortune, as all the elements of the plot that had been eluding him fell neatly into place.

The next day Dan would be back at work. The next day Shelley would inevitably join him in the shed to discuss their future planting strategy.

The next day there would be an unfortunate accidental conflagration in the shed. An explosion caused by leaking petrol coming into contact with a naked flame.

Of course, the plan probably meant that Dan would die as well as Shelley. But, Greg Lincoln reflected with a self-satisfied grin, you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

Having decided where and how to arrange his wife's murder, Greg Lincoln began to concentrate on the details of his plan.

It was absolutely certain that she would spend some time the following day in the shed with Dan. Shelley, for whom—inexplicably to her husband—a day without gardening was a day without meaning, had been restless over the holiday period, and the presents of gardening books she'd received had clearly been a poor substitute for actually getting her hands dirty. And yet she seemed unable to do anything in the garden on her own initiative; she needed Dan there as a guide and sounding board. Shelley really did have a very weak personality. Once the shock of her death had passed, Greg felt sure he would have real difficulty in remembering anything about his former wife.

Anyway, by then he would be permanently with Vicki Talbot. The tantalising image of her body strengthened his resolve—which didn't really need any strengthening—to dispose of Shelley as quickly as possible.

So . . . a conflagration in the garden shed. The windows would be too small for Shelley and Dan to escape through, but the door would need to be locked some-

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how. Locked in a way that would not be a giveaway to post-conflagration forensic examination . . . ?

Greg Lincoln enjoyed the challenge this problem presented to him. He was feeling even more confident than usual. The energy given to him by his passion for Vicki would be channeled into devising Shelley's death.

He studied the outside of the shed door. A broken old-fashioned wooden latch had been superceded by a more robust system with an eye screwed into the frame and a clasp to the door. An open padlock hung from the eye. It could be removed to fit the clasp over the ring, then replaced and closed to secure the building. But a locked padlock in the embers of Shelley Lincoln's funeral pyre would be far too much of a giveaway.

Greg concentrated on the older fixture instead. It was a traditional Sussex design—a wooden bar pivoted by a screw in the door and fitting, when the door was closed, into a wooden slot on the door frame. A rectangular hole cut into the door would once have held a handle attached to the bar, which someone inside could lift to let themselves out. But the crosspiece was missing, and the bar hung downwards.

He tested the bar, which he found still rotated on its screw-fitting. Hardly daring to believe his luck, he moved it round like the hand of a clock until it stood upright above its pivot. He then gently banged the door closed. Shaken off balance, the bar very satisfyingly moved through an arc to settle into its welcoming groove in the door frame. The shed was locked from the outside.

Greg Lincoln felt a surge of glee. The Sussex craftsman who had made the latch had made it good and robust. Greg used a screwdriver to tighten the screw and, after a few adjustments, found that every time he closed the door, the bar would infallibly fall into the locked position. With no inside handle to reopen it.

Deliberately leaving the latch bar hanging in its downward position, he moved into the shed. Petrol next . . . petrol to fuel the conflagration. The smell inside was already so strong that he didn't reckon Shelley or Dan would notice however much more of the stuff he sprinkled around. But he was careful. Glossy pools on the floor would raise suspicions. So he poured his petrol trail out of sight beneath the benches and armchairs. He shifted the sofa bed and generously soaked its back, which would be out of sight against the wall.

Greg Lincoln moved deftly, glorying in his own cleverness. While he prepared his fire-trap, his mind coolly assessed possible methods for igniting it. Had to be something remote, something that would activate while he was safely off the scene. He'd decided that the following day he actually might do what he had claimed to be doing so many times before, and go to the golf club. There'd be plenty of old bores there, escaping the cloying bonds of a family Christmas, able to give him an alibi for the time of his wife's murder.

The ignition method couldn't involve anything electronic. That too might leave traces. No, he needed something that would disappear in the general conflagration, offering no clues to outside intervention.

A fuse, it had to be some kind of fuse.

He looked around the shed for inspiration. He still felt confidently calm. He was in a zone where he knew that the right solution would come to him. Greg Lincoln could not fail.

But nothing he saw inside rang the right bells. Pensively, he moved out into the garden, and found himself drawn to the bonfire he had observed earlier. The bonfire that was still burning three days after Dan had lit it.

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The centre of the fire was dead white ash, but from the circle around the edges little spirals of smoke rose. Greg's tasselled loafer probed tentatively into the smoulderings, and instantly found what he was looking for.

Amidst the embers were some strands of brown garden twine. One or two were glowing, alight but burning very slowly.

He found a big ball of twine in the shed. Unwilling to risk accidents inside the incendiary bomb that he had created, he conducted his experiments in the garden.

First he tried soaking a length of the twine in petrol, but it burnt too quickly. Besides, that might leave some forensic trace. Then he just lit the twine as it was and found, to his intense gratification, that it worked perfectly. If he held his fuse up and lit the end, it flamed only for a few seconds, but continued to burn. A red glow moved slowly along, and the twine was consumed at a satisfyingly steady rate. The smouldering burn was resilient, too; however much he shook the fuse or waved it about, the twine continued inexorably to burn. It must have been treated with some flammable preservative.

He tested his fuse's effect on a pool of petrol on the red-brick path. When the tiny red glow reached the fluid, a very rewarding flare-up ensued.

Consciously slowing down his pulse rate, Greg Lincoln experimented until he had a fuse that would burn for almost exactly twenty minutes. Perfect. The following morning he would wait until Shelley and Dan had gone into the shed, then come down to the garden, check his locking device had worked, and bang on the door to say he was off. By the moment of combustion he would be safely in the golf club, surrounded by witnesses.

He laid the fuse to run through a knothole into the shed and to end up in a pool of petrol behind the impregnated sofa-bed. He set the latch bar in the upright position. Then he returned to Lovelock Manor to reward himself with a large Scotch. He resisted the temptation to ring Vicki Talbot. Much better to contact her with the *fait accompli*, the news that his wife was dead, and that he was free to spend the rest of his life with his lover.

That evening he was particularly solicitous to Shelley, showing uncharacteristic interest in the booty she had brought back from the garden centre. He didn't dislike his wife. Her personality was too pallid to inspire dislike. And he felt a mild regret about the fate that awaited her the next morning. But not enough regret to make him change his plan.

He slept surprisingly well, but woke early, round six, to the sound of heavy rain. His first reaction was delight. Rain would ensure that, once Shelley and Dan got into the shed, they wouldn't leave it in a hurry. They would work out their horticultural strategy in the dry, rather than venturing out into the garden.

But no sooner had he had this heartwarming thought than he was struck by another, less pleasing consequence of the heavy rain. His twine fuse would get soaking wet!

Greg managed to get out of bed and collect his clothes without rousing Shelley. His wife continued to breathe evenly, little knowing that what she would wake to would be the last morning of her life.

Greg's carefully cut twenty minutes of twine was indeed very wet. Not wishing to re-enter the booby-trapped shed, he had brought a lighter with him from the kitchen. When he fed a flame to the frayed end, the twine did catch alight and flare briefly, but then sputtered and soon no glow showed. He threw it down on the ground in frustration, and tried to think of some other

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way of detonating his time bomb.

For a tiny moment he felt doubt. The possibility crept into his mind that he might fail. But he quickly extinguished the unworthy thought. Of course he would succeed. He was Greg Lincoln.

It didn't take long for the solution to come to him. Simple, really. Better than the twine fuse. The only surprise was that he hadn't thought of it earlier.

He opened the shed door, and carefully left it open. To lock himself in would not be very clever, he thought with a chuckle. And as soon as he walked inside, he realised just how perfect his new plan was. The overcast sky made the interior darker than ever. Which meant that when Shelley and Dan came in, the first thing they would do would be to light the candle.

Cylindrical and large, probably three inches in diameter—ideal for his purposes. A half-inch of blackened wick showed at the top.

Taking advantage of the tools he found in the shed, Greg worked with confident efficiency. First he used a Stanley knife to take a quarter-inch slice off the top of the candle. Careful not to cut through the wick, he excavated a hole about two inches across and three down into the centre of the candle.

He cut the wick, so that it was three inches long, and poked the blackened end through the hole in the disc. Lighting the wick briefly ensured that the surrounding wax melted and cemented into position.

The next bit was easy. He simply poured petrol into the little wax reservoir that he had created and replaced the lid he had cut off, so that its trailing white wick was immersed in the fluid. He then used the warmth of his fingers to seal the wax and hide the mark of his cut. He would rather have used a flame, but prudence warned him against the unnecessary risk. Anyway, Dan wasn't going to look at the candle closely. The first thing he'd do when he and Shelley entered the gloom would be to find his lighter and put it to the candle wick.

And then—boom. Conflagration. Greg Lincoln almost hugged himself at his own cleverness.

He was about to leave the shed when he was stopped by the sound of approaching voices.

"Where's Greg?" asked Dan's voice, deep and throaty.

"He's gone. He said he had some golf thing."

"At this time in the morning?"

"I don't know. I never ask what he's doing."

"No, you let him ride roughshod over you."

"Dan . . ." There was a note of pained pleading in Shelley's voice.

"Well, the way he treats you . . . it makes me mad."

"He's my husband, Dan."

"Useless kind of husband. He doesn't care about you at all. The only person he thinks about is himself."

"That's not true. Yesterday he bought me a hundred pounds' worth of gardening tokens, and he really sounded interested in the garden."

Greg was touched by his wife's tribute to his solicitude. But he remained aware that he was in a rather awkward situation—geographically, at least.

"Oh, yes?" asked Dan cynically. "He doesn't care about you. I'm the only one who cares about you. I'm the only one who loves you, Shelley."

Hm, thought Greg, there's a turnup for the book. And he waited with interest to hear what would come next.

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"I know you do, Dan. But—"

"And you love me too. Go on, you've told me you do."

"I may have said things like that in the past, Dan . . ." Shelley wasn't finding what she was saying easy. "But the fact is that Greg is my husband. I'm a Catholic, and I believe that marriage is for life."

"Even a rotten marriage that makes you unhappy?"

"Maybe it's only a rotten marriage because I haven't worked hard enough to make it a better one. And the fact is that Greg is my husband and we have both sworn to stay together until death do us part."

Oh, thought Greg, what a splendidly loyal little woman I married. Pity I've got to murder her.

"And if death did you part?"

"What do you mean, Dan?"

"If Greg died, would you marry me?"

There was a long silence, then Shelley's voice said quietly, "Yes, Dan. I can give you that satisfaction at least. If Greg were to die, I would marry you."

Oh well, there's a nice warm thought for them to end their lives with, thought Greg.

"Thank you for saying that," murmured Dan, his voice thick with emotion. Then Greg heard him approaching the shed, even putting his hand on the open door. "So I can't tempt you in?" asked the gardener. "Just for a quick cuddle?"

"No," said Shelley firmly. "It wouldn't be fair to Greg."

Her husband was divided between respect for his wife's loyalty and annoyance at the realization that, if she wouldn't go into the shed, he was going to have to find another way of murdering her.

"All right. If that's what you feel . . ." And, as a petulant punctuation to his words, Dan slammed the shed door shut.

Things happened very quickly then. Just at the moment Greg heard the clunk of the wooden door latch finding its slot and locking him in, he was aware of a sudden roar of combustion behind him. He turned back to the inferno that had once been a sofa-bed, and saw flames licking along the floor towards him from every direction.

Greg Lincoln had been a very good planner, after all. His twenty-minute twine fuse hadn't really gone out. Burning more slowly because of the damp, its spark had still crept inexorably towards the knothole and the pool of petrol inside the shed.

Realising that that's what must have happened was the last thought of Greg Lincoln's unlamented life.

And his last sight, through the flames and the cracking windows of the garden shed, was his wife Shelley, held in the protective arms of the gardener Dan. Which was where she would stay for the remainder of her very happy life. ●

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BLACK MASK

THAT KIND OF GUY

by Gary Cahill

I walked up the street, turned to head down the hill, and got the full effect. Late in the year and late in the day, the setting sun colors the west side of the skyline a burning, burnished, ruddy gold, until an ever richer deep-sea blue washes over from the Jersey side to put out the fire. Dramatic. Beautiful. I put my head down against the breeze off the harbor and moved on.

As the day darkened, I rolled toward the waterfront to meet this jerk Charlie to address our differences concerning an even bigger jerk—the drug-slinging, woman-smacking, kid-terrorizing scumball I call Roly Poly Paul. I was vexed; Charlie was Paul's guy, and we needed to sort it out. At the bottom of the hill I crossed the street, and walked toward the river.

Gary Cahill's crime-noir debut in Black Mask came about as an answer to a challenge put to him by his friend and now fellow crime writer Jim Fusilli. The tale also qualifies for *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories. It's the very first published fiction of New York Public Library staffer Cahill, who lives in Weehawken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City in which much of his atmospheric story is set.

A couple blocks ahead I saw a car parked along a hedgerow in the lumberyard lot and someone leaning on its right front fender. The car was a dark, nondescript four-door, and the lounger was Charlie. I got closer and saw he was dressed down in a way I'd never seen—sneakers, blue jeans, and a hooded sweatshirt in place of his usual city-side roach-killer boots, pegged black jeans, and a slick, shiny black leather blazer meant to announce how well he was doing. He turned his head and nodded as I hit the corner across from the lot.

Charlie was all smiles, and as I crossed the street the headlights from a car heading up the boulevard behind me caught something in his left hand, glinting. As I drew near, I noticed the trunk was open, just barely. He said, "Hey" as he rolled his shoulders forward and took one step alongside the front passenger door.

As hard as I could, I clubbed him with my forearm and fist across the left side of his head. He dropped the wrench, rolled left, hit the right front fender,

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and bounced back up. That shot across the ear must have hurt like hell, but it didn't do the job. My right, brought up from the ankles to plant the wrench under the left side of his jaw, did. His neck looked like it stretched six inches as he fell across the hood. I wouldn't have been surprised to see his head start coming off.

I poked and pushed him with the wrench until he fell off the car's front end to the ground, took his cell phone, money clip, and wallet, pocketed the cash, left his gun. Ah, the final indignity of being found armed, covered in your own blood instead of someone else's, and dead. I stuffed the wrench under my jacket and walked toward the ferry, sauntered to the dock's edge, shared what had happened with the river, and turned my attention back to Roly Poly Paul.

In this part of my life, most everybody calls me G, tagged by some blue-collar blacks who used to help me augment, loudly, the soul and R&B jukebox selections at a few West Side bullet-and-beer bars. I was out of it enough to think it reflected my first-name initial instead of just being a truncated version of "guy" or something. Ah, live and learn, but it stuck.

Hang around those joints enough—not to mention others with a more hard-scrabble clientele—be short on cash enough and you'll soon run into someone more than willing to help, for a price. I ran into Willy, though, truth be told, I'd known Willy years before, both of us being locals from my side of the Hudson. He sported other facets to his existence beyond the legit, most of them relating to a family he chose to belong to, through blood ties of a different sort than heredity. He ran games for high rollers, complained you couldn't find a kid to highjack a truck or who was worth a damn in any way anymore, kept an eye on street-level guys to make sure all the money coming in was going downtown, and occasionally got involved in painting houses or wet work or whatever you call it when somebody's got to go.

So Willy offered to help me out of a minor monetary crisis.

"Yeah, yeah," I complained. "But for a few hundred bucks up front, I'll be paying five times that for five years."

"No, no, I'm offering you the inside deal . . . Not for civilians . . ." is what he told me.

Inside deal. The classic paradox I pondered here is that no one should borrow from these guys unless you already have enough in your pocket to pay it all back, and more, immediately.

So I took the money. And then I couldn't pay it back.

If you have credit with a drug dealer and don't make good, you can work it off by moving product. As long as the word "trafficking" doesn't come up in any official capacity, it's all good. I am not the kind of guy you picture collecting for the mob, but Willy told me my new job was hardly that, at least in spirit. There are always mooks in for just a little bit, and sending hard guys to straighten them out is more muscle than you need. A pissed-off, truly violent man I am not, so I did what I had to, mostly advising people on doing the right thing, only rarely pushing anyone around, and realizing I was now connected, if only by a really long extension cord. I guessed Charlie had been wired about like this, until I pulled the plug.

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Which brings me back to Paul, whose roly-polyness merely identified him physically. In action, he was a slumming works-upstairs-at-a-bank-on-the-East-Side, always had two too many at the bar, talked too loud, laughed too loud, annoying bastard who would mouth off when Charlie was around because Charlie was supplying the coke and pills and whatever other dope Paul was moving and word was that Charlie was a protected guy, being a money-maker for some of Willy's associates. My problem with Roly Poly Paul wasn't the dope he maybe gave Sally. It was what else he gave Sally.

In a small town, even one close to the big city, there are only a few degrees of separation from person to person, and stories get around. I didn't know her well. Sally was younger than me, short blond shag, grey-blue eyes, ex-athlete, and quite attractive for all that. But she'd had it hard. A single mom of two grade-school girls, the father gone. She was on assistance, vulnerable, sad, and lonely, and had taken up with Roly Poly Paul, who had an apartment a couple blocks away, convenient for his commute to the city. When it seemed to the neighbors that Sally was suddenly running into a lot of doors or slipping a lot in the bathroom, word got out. And it wasn't so much knowing just enough about her as it was knowing too much about him that got me onto RPP's case—a lump like him belting around a hometown girl. I don't think so. Hey, I really don't do that kind of thing, but officially I am a collector for the mob, right? Maybe I could take one step forward, get a feel for it. Maybe I could do just enough.

I started bad-mouthing the round mound in the places where I'd seen him hanging; not too deep on the West Side where the last of the real tough-guy joints were now only shadows of their old selves but closer to Midtown where a more effete crowd dabbled in what he had for sale, at bust-out prices, mind you. There was just so much to dislike about this guy.

Paul'd heard I was on to him, and I ran into him once, bellowing and buffooning about something until I caught his eye from the far end of the bar. He tried to hold the stare-down gaze but broke it off. Head down, he pulled out his cell, talked into it while he looked at the floor, out the glass in the front door, back at me. He snapped the phone closed, knocked down the rest of his beer, turned to leave, and I called out. Loudly.

"Tomorrow, big boy," I said. "Let's have a chat. Settle all this up."

The bouncy prick actually turned around, grinned, and tossed off a shrug as he walked out the door.

"What's tomorrow?" asked Stella from behind the stick, pulling another for table service.

I had to think about that.

Next afternoon I walked up the avenue toward the big old bar that had been right there as long as I've been alive—not the oldest in the city by a long shot, but venerable still and a rarity in a place overrun by real-estate mania. I used the door on the side street, about halfway down the long bar between stand-up tables and sit-down booths. Roly Poly Paul and Charlie were already there up front. Willy was at the back end. All the hilarity and bravado that encircles Paul and Charlie kept them occupied while I slipped past the booths to sidle up.

"Howdy, Bill Bag," I said, using the nickname Willy'd acquired from his cash-carrying errands. "The gang's all here."

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Nice and easy, Willy drank down half a tumbler of Johnnie Red, put the edge of the glass to the bar top, tapped it a few times, finished it, and leaned his head over toward me. He looked down the bar toward Charlie as he spoke.

"Yeah," Willy said, "Charlie, he carries that off up here with these people, but he's nothin'. He's like the fifth cousin of somebody's friend so they throw him a bone. They make a little money off him, means almost nothin'. He ain't close to bein' no made guy. He's like a charity case doin' a small-time coke thing almost anybody could do. Plays that up, all in black, leather coat, plasters the freakin' hair back. He looks like the guy who gets shot in the movie and nobody gives a damn." He started another scotch, nice and easy. "I checked. You get between him and Paul, deal with that thing you got, have a productive little talk, no problem. Charlie's connection," he stumbled, "his *protection*, is . . . illusory."

I sat quietly for a moment. "Illusory? Illusory . . ."

We started laughing, not too hard, but the place got a little quiet and we reined it in. I chuckled off to the men's room, went to a urinal with my shoulder to the paint, the Willy Rule being that with your back to the wall you can see everything that's coming. What I saw was Charlie. He pulled up alongside. "Got a problem with my boy, huh?"

Well. "Good job, lives a little dangerously, amazing he's gettin' something from any woman at all, and he smacks her around with two little kids, yeah, that tub needs to . . ."

Me getting louder by the second had apparently sounded the alarm, because the next thing I saw was Willy at the door, eyes wide, and looking right at me. Charlie's head was down, finishing, and I head-shook Willy off into the toilet stall behind me. I followed Charlie back into the barroom.

"I'm not letting this go, Chuckie. This is a problem that gets solved."

He straightened up a little at "Chuckie" but kept walking toward the front, toward Paul. But my end wasn't just noise. I don't know what it was. I am not the kind of guy who does this sort of thing, but I followed Charlie and suggested we were not where we could comfortably discuss our differences, and that tomorrow evening at the lumberyard parking lot just outside the tunnel would do. My "suggestion" was perhaps a little more than that, as I felt the situation demanded. I mean, I didn't snarl at him or anything. I walked back toward Willy and asked Stella for a Jameson, rocks, which I intended to sip, slowly, for a long time. I didn't, so I ordered another.

"Watch that guy tomorrow night," Willy warned.

"I don't think so," I said. "He's gonna want to impress me with his powers and get me backing off."

"Just remember when you're done to slit him open so he sinks."

"Oh, come on. This is all about Paul, man—once Charlie sees the light and gets out of the way."

"You goin' home yet?" Willy asked.

"Nah, not yet. I'm gonna hang, ease into this. What about you?"

He ordered another. "As long as you're here, I'm here."

Next night I met with Charlie. We know how that went.

It was funny watching Roly Poly Paul use his cell phone, curse, slam it shut, and start sweating. You'd think he'd lose some weight. Sometimes he looked like he was in a sauna. No product to move, no man in black to hang with, nobody to

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back him up, to make him something. I guess Charlie hadn't been IDed yet. Tough guy'd probably never even been printed.

Willy and I started studying him, Paul always waiting for something that never came, on the phone, nervous, almost shaking, until one day it just washed over me. He was alone now, frightened, scared, a lot like Sally had been, and I began to somehow know what he had coming. I can't really explain it . . . it was big and wide and proper and really seemed inevitable. I locked onto Paul's eyes and wouldn't let go, got a beer from Stella without looking away, and just opened up a big good old grin. Right at him. I felt Willy get real still, and watched Roly Poly Paul go for the cell phone once more, borderline frantic this time, punching away, making a call that would be answered by a blue crab near a bulkhead at the edge of the Hudson before Charlie ever picked it up. Something like this suddenly became clear to him, and Paul took off out the front door and headed to catch the bus home. I bolted out the side door and ran to the back door of the bus terminal, and made my way to the platform where Paul would be. A line hadn't formed yet—a bus had probably just pulled out—so I waited on the street, outside the entry door to the parking slip, waiting for the riders to gather, waiting for Paul. What I got first was Willy.

"You son of a bitch . . . Why didn't you say something? How can you still run so fast you old bastard . . ." he gasped, holding his side, bent over at the waist.

"I'm a motivated guy," I said. "Step back. Don't let him see us." And the bus pulled in.

Quickly fifteen people were on the line, the two of us watching, and then we boarded, stepped to the rear, took seats by the back door, Willy just behind it, me just across the aisle, hunkered down, low profile. Paul got on, didn't see us, sat right near the front. The bus pulled out and headed through the tunnel to Jersey. Just a few minutes, not much traffic, and we were out with a quick view of that glowing sunset skyline until we hit the boulevard and the local streets. A few blocks along and the entire cityscape opened up again from across the river, the postcard shot, glittering, beautiful, the sky already going to that deep, dark blue. Paul's stop, Liberty Place, was just ahead, and he reached up and rang to get off while Willy got a headstart and slipped into the well by the back exit.

Paul stood to gather himself. So did I, and I waited for him to see me. Willy was out the door; he jogged back a block and turned down the side street. Paul's head came up, caught a glimpse. He spun to the front door, jumped down, turned around, and blazed across the boulevard against the light and ran down Liberty. I blew out of the bus and built up a real head of steam before I crossed the street, which was a good thing, because Roly Poly Paul's little feet were flying.

I was gaining on him now.

Halfway down Liberty, Paul could not have been happy to see Willy, a little out of breath, just standing there outside the high school. He was a little beyond the entrance to the faculty lot, really not much more than an alley at the back of the building. There's usually no going through Willy, and Paul tore a left into the lot, aiming toward his apartment on Eldorado Place. And now he could not have been happy to see the black steel gates on the Eldorado side closed, the latch posts stuck into the sidewalk and the lock chain looped through. Damn, it's always open, he must have thought, along with realizing that Willy's not usually around to mess with it. I turned in behind him. Some lightweight boards from a garden framing project were up against the school wall, and I picked one up with

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my right hand. Willy was hanging back. I walked ahead. Paul had left Liberty to reach Eldorado. The irony. Maybe I'd help him get there.

Roly Poly Paul had turned around and was ponging between the walls and the gates, first just fretting and then trying to dodge. He took a shot at blowing past me on my left, and I 360ed to my right with both hands on the board and smacked him right across the chops. He reeled into a corner and I whacked him again, knocking him toward the center of the gates, blood from his nose all over, his eyes welling, not words but sounds somewhere between moaning and pleading I heard flying by me and I cracked him once more. He went to one knee and I flung the board two-handed up and back over my head, then moved in and drove my knee hard and deep into his ribs, and again and again until I knew I felt damage. I grabbed him by his arm and yanked him up and felt something give in the shoulder, maybe the elbow too. I grabbed his coat and banged his head back against the gates and spun him around and banged his face against the gates and felt how, yes, this was still about Paul and Sally but as I kept banging his face against the gates it was now more about me and a big, overwhelming feeling of rightness and satisfaction and comfort, like truly great music you heard and understood better than anyone else. It was operatic, my head back with eyes open to that deep-blue-sea sky growing darker as night kept falling, admiring the moon as I kept rolling my shoulders and arms forward, stroke after stroke, until it felt so good I stopped.

I left him in a heap, surprisingly not too much mess on my jacket. As I walked back to the sidewalk the crowd of locals that had gathered was attentive but silent, with a few single nods in my direction. And across the street were two little girls and Sally. I looked, and she looked back, and I craned my neck to keep on her, but then I had to watch where I was going. At the bottom of the hill I turned onto Highwood to go home and heard the cop cars screaming to the scene.

The story was in the *Journal* the next day. It mentioned "critical condition" and "rumors of drug use" and "domestic disturbance complaints" and "no eyewitnesses" and "no suspects." And so that was that.

Willy called one night soon after, and I went to meet him the next afternoon. He was at the middle of the bar by the taps, the desire to avoid the front end no longer an issue.

I walked over and said something kind of like "Stella, mi estrella . . ." and she said something exactly like "shut up." It used to be all Irish hard-ons working this place. Now it's a lot of women: Mel and sometimes Janeel during the day, Lina and Marlene at night, but mostly we ran into Stel, and that was all right.

"You gotta go see them, it'll be okay," Willy said, explaining I was being called to account for whatever I knew about a small-time money maker no longer on the scene. "He was nothing, they'll replace him in a minute, but they can't let even little stuff like this just go, looks like anybody can just do whatever they want. Cowboys. But Charlie was a bad guy for everybody, big mouth, showy, not worth it." He gave me an envelope to hand over when I got there, something they needed to know, he said. "See you back here, couple of hours, whatever." And I was off.

"Well, Bill Bag, that was interesting." I sat down and stared at him, almost bemused. "I'm in a little deeper than I was before. Right, Will?" He smiled, took

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a little sip of whatever it was, listened. "I seem to have earned bigger responsibilities, not that I want them, in the Downtown Collection Agency, one of which is riding shotgun with you on your appointed rounds. Man. But you knew that. Right, Doctor Scum?"

"Yes, well you've shown you can get things done," Willy said. His laughter was warm; not a usual thing.

"I'm not that kind of guy."

"You like baseball? Take a look at the scoreboard."

Well, right is right. "Gee, let's talk some more," I said, and we did, laughing a lot, until almost dusk when I took off for a stroll down Liberty Place.

Another beautiful evening going to night, warm for getting on into autumn. I walked toward the high school, I don't know, scene of the crime maybe. Or maybe pass by and see if anyone was around. They were. I could see Sally, towheaded boyish haircut bouncing, a bit more animated than you'd expect. She seemed to be arguing with some neighbors who came into view as I neared the corner across from the school lot. Just a few feet away and she noticed me and turned to say "Hi" with her head tilted back to her right and her chin pointing out to her left and shifting back and forth, arms flapping and hands kind of spinning slowly at the wrists, each eye rolling around and back on its own. Talking, talking, talking, saying I don't know what because she was just blathering and I was immediately beyond listening and she was obviously so high I didn't know what to do. Her girls were maybe twenty feet behind her on the sidewalk, heads down, just kind of standing around, waiting for their mom. The several women I'd seen were still stuffing bills into their jeans, money that had fallen when Sally spotted me. Guess I got the drop on something. Man, drug-dealing abhors a vacuum as much as nature does. Probably no worse than even money the guy who'd already picked up Paul's business had also taken his old apartment. And maybe taken up with Sally, judging by the pressure bruises on her arms and the marks on the right side of her neck. One thing that would be new, and maybe higher than Sally, was the price of whatever New Paul was peddling. New guy, new game, automatic inflation. I was probably less popular on this block than I thought, less than I deserved to be. It took only a few seconds to go from shock to rage to resolve.

Sally's girlfriends were riding the same train she was, and they kept a cold focus on me. Dead stares, even breathing, thinking, thinking. They had all been on the street that last time I was in the neighborhood, and this zeroing in on me got me thinking maybe fewer of them around would lower the odds of somebody talking to who knows who.

I could see their goddamn melon heads just splitting open ear to ear, flapping up and down, spilling their guts about a certain evening and how it all came back in a dream and yes we sure can identify him, Officers. Since being given a great opportunity to change their situations, they had all, even Sally, opted to keep doing the same old things.

Well, I had done some brand-new things myself. Night fell as I went down the hill and headed for home. I threw a look back, then straightened out and walked on, realizing that every day really is a journey toward self discovery.

I really am not that kind of guy. But those rat bastards better hope I don't develop a taste for it. ●

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HARDBOILED

by Tim Maleeny

Some women just looked like trouble. This one didn't, which should have been the first clue.

Carver looked up from his paperwork as she stepped into the dingy office. Short blond hair, expensively cut, medium height, pale blue eyes. Gray suit over a cream blouse that successfully hid curves Carver could only imagine. A ring where it mattered, displaying a rock that cost more than Carver made in a month.

There were only two desks in the cramped space, his and the ancient roll-top that belonged to his partner, Max, who was having a late lunch at the sports bar down the street. The blonde didn't hesitate as she navigated the moving boxes in heels that should have been registered as weapons. She made a beeline for Carver. He forced a smile as she helped herself to the client chair.

She didn't return the smile but looked at him expectantly, as if he should already know why she was there. It was a look he'd been getting for most of his adult life.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, in a tone that acknowledged that she already had. "What brings you to my office?"

"I'm looking for my husband."

"Is he missing?"

She laughed, a flash of white teeth. "In a manner of speaking, yes."

"I don't follow."

"He's missing," she said, "but I know where he is."

"Is this a riddle?" Carver tried not to sound irritated.

The blonde laughed again, mirthlessly this time. "He's working," she said. "He's *always* working. That's the problem."

Carver had heard this tune before, sitting in this very chair. He twisted his own wedding ring with the thumb of his right hand, feeling like he was tightening a loose screw. He nodded at the woman across from him but didn't respond. First rule of successful client interviews: *Let them do all the talking.*

Tim Maleeny is a graduate of Dartmouth College and Columbia University. He currently lives in San Francisco, near Chinatown, the setting for his first mystery novel, *Stealing the Dragon* (Murder Ink), which was named a "Killer Book of the Month" by the Independent Mystery Booksellers Association. He has followed up that debut with two more books in the series: *Beating the Babushka* (Murder Ink 2007) and *Greasing the Piñata* (Poisoned Pen Press 2008). This is his first story for us.

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She gave him that look again, waiting.

Waiting.

They sat like that for a full minute before he couldn't take it anymore. So much for the impassive PI routine.

"Your husband is always working," he repeated dully, unsure how to move this along.

"Yes."

Jesus. It was like pulling teeth.

"Could you be more specific about why you're here?" Carver wondered if he and Max should bring a TV into the office, start watching Dr. Phil or Oprah to gain more insight into their clients.

"I've tried calling, but he's always busy," she said.

"Too busy to talk to his wife."

"Exactly."

"So you decided to leave work in the middle of the day, come to a private investigator's office."

She held out her nails, examined them one by one before deeming them worthy. She returned her gaze to Carver, clearly undecided if he met the same standard.

"My husband," she said. "He's been . . . distant."

"Distant?"

"Preoccupied."

"With what?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," she replied.

"Have you been following him?"

She sat up straighter as she asked, "Why on earth would you think that?"

Carver shrugged. "Some women do." Then he added, "Before they come here."

She relaxed. Not much, but a little. "They play at private investigator before hiring one?"

Carver nodded. "Something like that."

She shook her head. "I'm not that suspicious."

"Yet you left work to come here," replied Carver. "To see me."

"Fair enough." She pursed her lips. Even though they weren't smiling, Carver had to admit they were nice lips. "Maybe I am worried."

"You say he's preoccupied," said Carver. "Has your husband always worked long hours?"

"Yes . . . no. Not always." She exhaled loudly. "Maybe, when we used to work together at the law firm."

Carver nodded. "Did he work long hours then?"

"No . . . yes." She shrugged. "I guess we both did. Maybe I didn't notice as much."

"But now it's different."

She held Carver's gaze for a minute, as if she understood why he was asking but still resented him for it. She'd come here for answers, not for a look in the mirror.

"Since he started his own business," she said, "he almost never comes home for dinner. Some nights he doesn't come home at all."

"That must be hard," said Carver, trying to pump as much empathy into his voice as possible. Clients *loved* empathy.

She gave him a stern look. "You've no idea."

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Some clients loved empathy. Apparently not this one.

"You're right," he said, a little too quickly. "I don't."

"I've been worried," she said, as if that explained everything.

"You're not jealous?" asked Carver. "Just worried?"

"I'm not the jealous type."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Maybe a little," she said, frowning. "He's living his dream, I'm still in the same old job. He's meeting new people. You know . . ." She let her voice trail off.

"Okay," said Carver. "What do you want me to do?"

"This is going to sound strange . . ." She let her voice trail off, suddenly shy. It didn't suit her. Carver wondered if he was being played.

"Try me," he said. "Neither one of us is getting any younger, sitting here talking."

"Fine," she said. "I want my husband home in time for dinner."

"That's it?" Carver waited a beat, waiting for the catch, the punch line, the other shoe to drop.

"Is that too much to ask?"

Carver was nonplussed. "You want your husband home in time for dinner."

"Yes."

"That's it."

"Yes."

"You're not going to shoot him when he gets there?"

"No," she replied, a disconcerting smile dancing around the edges of her mouth.

"Berate him?"

"No," she said. "I just want to talk to him."

She made it sound so simple. Carver rubbed his hands together and said, "Okay, I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks," she said. "I know I just walked in here, and you must be busy."

Carver gestured at the paperwork on his desk and shrugged. "Anything else?"

She glanced over her shoulder to see if they were still alone. No sign of Max. Before Carver could say anything, the blonde stood and came around the desk, leaned in close, her lips only inches from his ear.

"Don't be late, Mr. Carver."

Carver turned in his chair and gave her a long kiss before saying, "Whatever you say, Mrs. Carver."

She smiled, so quickly Carver thought he might have imagined it. "If you're good, maybe I'll even cook you breakfast." Then she blew him a kiss and sashayed out the door.

Carver looked at the chair where his wife had been sitting and thought about his priorities. Max would understand if he took the night off. They couldn't keep up this pace forever, not if they were in this for the long haul.

Carver put his feet on the desk and looked around the small office, the boxes still waiting to be unpacked. He thought about how far they'd come since doing background checks for his wife's law firm. Another six months, maybe a year, they could hire an assistant. He could never have done this without his wife. She was supportive, sexy, and patient. So very patient. How did he get so lucky?

He thought about breakfast and smiled.

She already knew how he liked his eggs. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SNOW BLANKET

by Eileen Anderson

A thumbnail-clip of moon watched thick, wet snowflakes hurtle to the ground and cling to the world in heavy clots. Stiff limbs, cloaked in white, rattled with ice-breath before they fell, splintering the silence.

With Kelly molded to his back, Andrew lay in bed, watching the sky pelt the fluorescent orange-tinged earth through horizontal slats. One muscle at a time, he peeled his calves from Kelly's shins and slid his feet out from under the blanket. Cool air licked his toes. He mopped his forehead and inched forward. Kelly shifted, curling in on herself for warmth. Once she settled, Andrew slipped from the bed and walked to the window, barefoot and relieved. The wind shrilled through the branches, and he felt the cold fingers of a slight draft creep through the window frame. In the morning, he'd undoubtedly find a Post-It note stuck to the refrigerator, requesting that he tape up the cracks.

While lacing up his sneakers, Andrew watched his wife sleep. He did not see how prettily the orange light played in her hair-shine. The balloon of flesh under her chin swelled persistently each time she inhaled. He only ever noticed the weight she'd put on at night, while she was asleep and unguarded. Andrew knew that someday—probably soon—Kelly would be laughing with one of the supermarket checkout girls, and she'd be unable to control this extra swell of neck flesh. It was just the first sign of what Andrew assumed would be a lifetime of mysterious bulges he never saw coming. He wished he'd noticed when they were dating.

But he hadn't. Looking through the blind slats, he tried to remember any red flags. None came to mind. Not even in retrospect. Kelly used to love working out. She'd had a tight stomach, with a soft ass and an easy smile. It made her day when someone thanked her for holding the elevator, and she cheerfully hummed her way through chores. She was happy. Until June, that is,

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when the doctor called with Andrew's test results and confirmed his sterility. Kelly stopped going to the gym. Andrew felt, when his wife began to leave notes for him, asking him to fix the toilet and the squeak in the pantry door, empty the gutter and stop up the hole the squirrels had eaten into the attic, that he owed her that much. He was getting tired of it, though, and was beginning to feel that he'd paid off his debt. If he complained, she'd toss an acid "What's the matter? Can't do it?" over her shoulder, and the conversation would end. Andrew learned not to complain.

Kelly nuzzled her face into her pillow (the bed's fluffiest) and mumbled something that sounded like "pygmy." When she was restless, Kelly spoke in her sleep. Andrew never understood the words. When it first started, he'd lay awake, searching for meaning in the sounds. After two months of sleepless nights, he learned to block her out.

Andrew tiptoed to the living-room closet and slid his jacket off its hanger. The coat had been a Christmas present from Kelly. She'd said the dark chocolate lambskin reminded her of his eyes. Andrew couldn't deny that he looked damn good in it.

He grabbed his hat and the car keys from the kitchen table, gently closed the back door—being farther away from the bedroom—behind him, and crunched his way to their Saturn. He rounded the house and sank to his ankles at the point where his lawn normally began its gentle downward slope. The world looked flat, clean. Although the cold bit his nose and made his eyes water, he unzipped his jacket and stood still, his body hair bristling. Andrew bent over and scooped a wedge of snow from behind the tongue of each of his sneakers. Kelly once told him that the bigger the snowflakes, the wetter the snow. She'd grown up in Minnesota, and knew a lot more than he did about winter. Andrew reasoned that if the flakes were wet instead of icy while it was still dark out, they would melt quickly as the sun rose. "Shouldn't be too bad," he said, but the wind whisked his words and their fog away as soon as they slipped through his parted lips. He re-zipped his jacket and leaped the rest of the way to the Saturn, looking back after every jump to see how far he had come.

Easing the car away from the curb and inching into the middle of the undefined, smooth road, Andrew headed north.

Hank plowed up the Baltimore-Washington Parkway in his '86 Oldsmobile. She was nothing to look at—a real clunker, Angie said when Hank bought it. She may be old, he'd said, but this bitch'll run forever. And she had. Outrun Angie, at least. Hank nestled back into the body crease ten years had worn into the bucket seat, and remembered how his wife used to sit right close to him while he drove—so close he could smell a trace of her body salt hiding beneath layers of floral scent: soap, shampoo, deodorant, perfume. She said she needed to stay close and hold on to him or else she'd fall between the cushions and never climb back out.

"Wouldn't that have been lucky," Hank grumbled, scraping the inside curve of each fingernail against his fang-tooth. The fang freaked most people out, but Angie used to beg him to trace designs with it across the base of her neck, the back of her left knee, harder and harder until he broke skin. Even now, when he concentrated really hard, he could still taste the rusty bite of her blood. He tasted it now.

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A near-empty bottle of sleeping pills rattled in the passenger seat, rolling with the turn of the road. He reached over and tossed it in the glove compartment. If there was one thing Hank hated, it was unnecessary noise.

In the backseat, Suzie slept as sweetly as an angel. Hank matched his breath to her rhythm, and mimicked the little "puh" noise she made before the slow rattle of each thick exhalation. Hank reached behind him and squeezed his daughter's knee. He was relieved that she hadn't completely outgrown her baby fat since the last time he'd seen her, fifteen months ago. She was taller, sure. But she still had round cheeks, soft knees, and silk-fine hair. She'd wailed for the first hour, but Hank had calmed her down, and now she was sleeping as peaceful as could be. There would be time for him to gain her trust later. For now, he just needed her quiet.

The first time Suzie stood on her own, and the last time he saw her before Angie issued the first in a string of restraining orders, she'd pulled herself upright by gripping on to his jeans. She'd examined the playground bench, dismissed it, and chosen him—*him*—and nothing Angie said changed that. Hank thought that may have been the first useful moment of his life. Because she was so damn pig-headed, Angie refused to understand, when she came downstairs with a can of Coke and found them missing, that he was just taking Suzie for a walk. No matter how many times he explained it to her, how simply he phrased it, she just wouldn't listen. The police had found Hank a mile away, jogging down a back street with Suzie tucked inside his tucked-in shirt.

He imagined Suzie wriggling through the bars of Angie's fourth-floor balcony, and nodded. "No place for a child," he said to no one. "Kids need their fathers. Period." He felt the weight of his switchblade snug in his pocket, smiled, and inhaled the fog from his cigarette. Oldsie accelerated down the empty highway. She was a tank in the snow.

Untouched, gentle slopes blanketed the parkway. The wind swept through the open window and beat Andrew's cheeks ruddy, burning icy tears from the corner of his eyes. The farther Andrew drove, the thicker the silence, and he realized that for the first time in his life, if he stopped moving, he would hear nothing. It was as if the entire forest had crouched down, waiting to spring. He saw no hawks, no deer. Even the clouds seemed to hold their breath as snowflakes slowed their kamikaze hurtle and drifted lazily to rest on his windshield.

Andrew's tracks stretched out behind him, and he wondered if the man in his moon-hammock cared enough about this solitary disturbance in the new snow to trace the tire line back to Kelly, muttering to her subconscious in their dark home.

"I should've left her a note," Andrew said. If, when he returned, his wife greeted him with another one of her "now that we're married" speeches, he might just strangle her. She drove him mad with her hundred and one questions about his day, and what he'd done, and what he ate and who he saw. He'd never actually hit her, and he never really intended to. "By God, a man can dream, though," he muttered.

Andrew leaned back in his seat and rolled his neck to either side. He used a meditation trick he'd learned in tai chi class to consciously uncoil his muscles, starting in his back and spreading down through his arms and legs. It didn't work. "Snow must've tensed me up," he said.

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Normally, Andrew would be approaching the tunnel into Baltimore by now. Radio blaring, he'd feel himself hover above the road, skimming the earth in his own private bubble. He loved the road, the time alone, the potential chance encounters with like-minded people who drive solely for the thrill of possibility. His imagination forged a path ahead of him up the parkway. Each trip, Andrew turned around one exit farther up the road. "Maryland today, Maine tomorrow," he'd say out loud, his thoughts winding their way to that first time his fingers would curl their grip around an axe, fell a tree, and build a fire in his very own woodland cabin.He loved to hear his own voice in the car. No traffic, no overtime, no alert levels. However, today the snow was collecting too fast, and he was beginning to think—with much irritation—that he'd have to turn around long before he checked another exit off his progress north.

Andrew resisted an impulse to pull into the shoulder. He wanted to stop scribbling lines across the sparkling canvas. He wanted the silence to swaddle and rock him to sleep. How long could he survive, just sitting in the car? Would he freeze solid or dehydrate first? When would they find him? What would Kelly wear to his funeral? The only appropriate outfit he knew of was her standard Everywoman "little black dress." Kelly filled hers out rather nicely—tight in all the right places. Last New Year's, he'd loved watching men aboard their midnight Potomac cruise eye her creamy cleavage, tightly pressed against satin. All night, her smile beamed with "this is the year" excitement. How long after the funeral would Kelly wait before she remarried? Andrew reasoned that once the windshield was covered over, he wouldn't have the attention span to sit still anymore, anyway. He kept driving.

The tracks in Andrew's rearview mirror were already filling in to shallow dimples. A brief moment of panic jolted him as he thought that he might not be able to find his way home. He chuckled—of course he would make it home—and lowered his eyes to the road. It took a moment for his brain to catch up to what was—or was not—before him. He should have seen a straight line to the horizon, but he didn't. Everything ahead appeared to be solid, and he was surprised, when he slid into the snowbank, that it gave way under the weight of his car. The world disappeared.

Andrew sat stock-still. The pulse of his heart pounded in his ears, so he knew he was alive. For a while, at least. He read once that, in an avalanche, you should cup your hands over your mouth to create an air pocket. He never understood how a handful of air could last for more than a few breaths, but he figured that his carful of oxygen should see him through till sunrise. Would he recognize sunlight through the snow-covered windshield? Andrew took tiny breaths to conserve air.

"This is stupid," Andrew muttered a minute later. Hesitant, he poked his throbbing forehead, and his fingertips came back bloody. He adjusted the rearview mirror and saw that a round, purple egg was forming just above his eyebrow, dribbling a slow trail of blood. "Piece of shit!" Andrew yelled, punching the plastic steering wheel, from which the air bag had not deployed.

Andrew fumbled to unhook his seatbelt and open the door. He stood unsteadily as snow wedged itself up his pants, past his socks. His legs were wobbly, but working. They were numb, apart from a dull, swelling pulse in his knee and a sharp pain in his right big toe. He leaned against the car as he tugged his gloves on, then scooped a handful of snow from the ground and held it to his forehead.

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Deciding that he wouldn't bleed to death, he looked the Saturn over. The whole front half was covered, and he had no way of telling what the damage was.

Ice scraper in hand, Andrew dizzily climbed onto the roof of the car and started pushing off piles of snow, which landed on the ground with muted thuds. He stopped after every three shoves to rest and reapply packed snow to his forehead. The bleeding had nearly stopped—the last snow scoop was only stained a light, transparent pink—but, either from the injury or the cold, Andrew felt his right eye swelling shut. "Son of a bitch," he muttered.

Oldsie was really rolling now. Slow and steady, that's all it'd take. Hank checked his watch: four-thirty. They were making great time, given the weather. Just keep humming along at a constant pace, crooning to Creedence, and he and baby girl'd be in Canada long before an alert went up. If anyone came knocking, they'd think the storm kept Angie at her mother's. Just to be safe, Hank had turned off the heat in Angie's apartment and pulled all the blinds shut. Not that anyone could see into the fourth-floor windows of that death-trap apartment, anyway, but still. Better safe than sorry, that's what Angie used to say.

"What in hell?" Hank said. With his chest pressed close to the steering wheel, he craned his neck to see through the windshield. Red lights blinked ahead, to his right. Hank slowed down and made out a man, covered in snow, waving his arms from the roof of a buried car. Hank peeked at his daughter, curled up and silent in the back. He envied her stillness, her peace. When she woke, he'd tell her she missed seeing the Abominable Snowman, and then she'd laugh as he bared his fang and aped the battle he'd waged to protect her from the beast. Hank kept driving. "Poor sonofabitch," he said. He took a drag from his cigarette and chuckled. A half-mile later, the gas light blinked red on the dashboard.

"Shit," Hank said. He eased the car to a stop and sat. The world was silent, except for the whistle of his own phlegmatic lungs. Even if a gas station were open, the last thing he wanted to do was stop and fill up. Apart from the obvious danger of being captured on video camera, the weather was too bad and the hour too early to pay without instigating small talk with the cashier. Small talk was risky—it created memories, impressions. Paying at the pump would electronically nail him down to a time and place. "Shit!" he yelled again, punching the dashboard. He should have thought to bring extra gas cans. Hank ran his tongue along the sharp ridge of his tooth and did the only thing he could think of. He pulled a screwdriver from the glove compartment and stepped out into the snow. With ears pricked for warning of another vehicle, he circled Oldsie and quickly removed its license plates after pissing on them to defrost the screws. He tucked the plates into the waist of his pants and carefully backtracked to the driver's side.

Andrew sat cross-legged on the roof of the Saturn, taking a breather while he cursed under his breath at the Oldsmobile that'd blown right past him. "No one's got any decency anymore," he muttered. He'd already uncovered the windshield, and he needed a rest before he tackled the hood. It was slow going. The more snow he swept off, the more densely he packed the snow beneath it. He wished he'd taken Kelly's Saab. Increasingly fearful over the last few years, Kelly had fortified everything she could get her hands on. In the trunk of the Saab, she kept a crate with two blankets, three boxes of granola bars, four jugs of water, a

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full first-aid kit, a lock de-icer, and a shovel. She carried a "fuel pack" in her purse at all times. "That's fine," she'd say when he accused her of being paranoid, "but I damn well refuse to survive an explosion and then die of dehydration while I'm trapped somewhere." She made a crate for his car, too, but he'd left it in the hall closet.

Andrew stood on the hood of the car and began to kick the snow. The sound of another engine interrupted his string of curses. He climbed back onto the roof for a better view, but he could see no approaching headlights. A car honked behind him, and he nearly slipped off the hood. The Oldsmobile had reversed its path up the highway.

The high-pitched groan of the Oldsmobile's door sliced the sharp air.

"Hey, friend," said the tall, wiry man who stepped, work boot first, from the car. "Looks like you've hit a spot of trouble."

The man's neck was like that of a doberman. Andrew could see the sinewy muscles stretching up from its peacoat collar. Skinny, but built like a rock. Andrew sucked in his gut and waved.

"Yeah, thanks for stopping," he said. "I've been here for a half-hour or so, and you're the first car that's passed."

"Really?" Dober Man said. He smiled. Red light glinted off his long canine tooth. "This seems to be a decent-sized road. Someone—a cop, a plow—must've been down here in the past half-hour. No?"

"Nope."

"No cops?"

"No one. I was beginning to think I was the only bastard crazy enough to be on the road in a storm like this. Thought I was done for." Andrew chuckled. "Good to meet another crazy bastard." The man didn't laugh.

"No offense, but you look like shit run over," Dober Man said. "What happened?"

"Freak accident. Hit an ice patch and slid into the shoulder."

The man scanned the roadway of fluffy snow and cleared his throat. "So does she run?"

"She did. I mean, she was still running fine until I turned her off. Let me see." Andrew climbed into the car and turned the key. The engine fired up immediately.

"Purring like an angel," Dober Man said. He smiled, with his head cocked to the side. "This is your lucky day, friend. We'll clean off the hood and have her on the road in no time. Leave her running so she melts some snow. Where you headed?"

Andrew did not respond. He wished people were taught to mind their own business at an early age. Conscious of being watched, Andrew walked around to the far side of the car—as steadily as he could manage—and started to pull down armloads of snow. "I sure do appreciate your help," he said.

The man made no move toward the car. "My baby girl's asleep in my backseat. The heat's not great in there. You mind if I lay her in your car, since it's warming up anyway?"

Andrew was uneasy, but he nodded and watched the man walk away. He couldn't put his finger on it. Something about the flatness of this man's dark eyes, which shone less in the orange streetlight than that odd, long tooth did, startled him. Andrew felt mesmerized. His breath came short and shallow, and

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he worked faster, lunging across the hood of the car and straining as he swept armload-sized heaps of compact snow to the ground. They landed on his frozen feet with anticlimactic, hushed pats. A droplet of sweat traced a trail from his collar, past his shoulder blades, and was finally absorbed into the cold, damp fabric clinging to the curve of his back. He just wanted to go home.

Dober Man returned, carrying his daughter. Even though she was wrapped in her father's bulky peacoat, Andrew thought she looked pale, still, stiff.

"Hey, is she okay?" Andrew asked.

The man laid her down on the backseat. With his sleeve, Andrew swiped the snow from the rear passenger window. The girl's hair hid her face.

"No, seriously," Andrew said. He tapped on the glass. "She looks cold."

"She'll be fine," Dober Man said. "She's a heavy sleeper. Takes after her mother." He began to scoop the snow off the car in shovel-sized handfuls.

"My wife should wake up soon. She'll be wondering where I am."

"She doesn't know you're gone?"

"She was asleep when I left, but she knows where I'm headed and the route I take, so she'd know where to look for me if, say, I crashed into a snowbank and couldn't get home." Andrew laughed, hoping that if he pretended he was relaxed, he would calm down. "By the way, my name's Andrew," he said. He held out his hand. Dober Man's bare paw engulfed Andrew's thickly gloved one in a firm handshake. Andrew was grateful for the layer of padding that kept him from wincing.

"Always pleased to meet a fellow night-prowler," the man said, squeezing Andrew's hand. "We're a dying breed, son. Name's Jessie."

"Dying? How?" Andrew held his breath.

Jessie grinned and cuffed Andrew's shoulder. Andrew wasn't sure if this was meant to be playful or threatening.

"Folk who've never known the freedom of an empty highway aren't called to drive it at this hour," Jessie said. "Too much traffic these days. Last thing most people want to do is leave their home and their family to sit in a cloud of exhaust from a sixteen-wheeler. They don't even know what they're missing. You have to be driven from your home to take to the highway."

Andrew smiled as much as his swollen eye would allow, nodding emphatically. These lines sounded familiar, like Jessie was imitating a movie character, playing a part.

"Know what I'm saying?" Jessie asked.

"Actually, I do." And he did, little as he wanted to admit it. "You married, Jessie?"

Jessie's head jerked back on his neck defensively. Andrew almost thought he saw his ears perk.

"Was. Once. Long time ago."

"What happened?"

"She died."

"I'm sorry."

"That's kind of you to say. Truth is," Jessie said, hushing his voice and leaning across the car, as if he were telling a secret. "Truth is, Cynthia was a whore."

Sour breath assaulted Andrew's nose. Never in his life had he heard a man refer to his dead wife as a whore. He pulled his scarf up over his face.

"Stop blinking at me like that," Jessie said. "Cyn and me, we had some prob-

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lems. And she'd be the first to say it. To anyone who would listen. So I don't feel bad saying it now. That bitch probably nagged her way right through the pearly gates."

"There has to be more to it than that," Andrew said. "Kelly nags at me sometimes, but I'd never call her a whore. It can't just be nagging."

"They're all whores. Take the word of an ol' divorcé. What're you doing out here if your wife's such a treat?"

Andrew clenched his jaw until his teeth hurt. "I don't sleep well."

"Right."

"So are you a divorcé or a widower, Jess?"

"Can't I be both?"

Andrew thought Jessie's toothy grin was too big.

They were working fast, and soon the right headlight, dented and buckled but still working, was uncovered. They started to clear space in front of the car. Andrew noticed how dark this man's bare hands looked as they scooped giant armloads of snow from the car. His thick, shell-like nails were jagged and stained brown along the cuticles.

"You from around here, Jess?"

"Nah, I'm heading up from sunny Georgia. We don't get snow like this in Georgia."

Andrew glanced back toward the Oldsmobile's bumper, but he couldn't see the license plate. "I'll bet you don't. Where you headed?"

"Boy, you sure do ask a lot of questions," Jessie said. "Now what business is that of yours?"

"Well, you asked me."

"And you didn't answer."

"I was just wondering what would make you bring that little girl out in this kind of storm." Andrew smiled, hoping he looked friendly. What would Kelly do if he didn't come home? Would she know where he had gone, after all? He tried to remember if he'd ever answered her when she asked him where he went during his night drives. She'd stopped nagging about it, so he must have answered at some point, Andrew thought. Until now, he hadn't wondered what she did while he was out, but just assumed that she never woke up. And if she did, that she rocked herself back to sleep. He wished he could rock her in her sleep now, his legs pressed close in the warm crook of her knee, his face, tickled on all sides by her hair, buried in the nape of her neck.

"I happen to be bringing my baby girl up to visit her gram in Rhode Island."

"You're driving from Georgia to Rhode Island in a blizzard?" Andrew said. If he were driving a toddler in a snowstorm, in the dark, he knew he wouldn't stop and help some unfortunate trapped on the side of the road. While that might make him an asshole, there was no way he was a bigger asshole than this Georgia redneck.

"Why are you helping me?" he asked. Andrew felt the cold and the labor taking their toll on him. The throbbing in his eye was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

"That should do it," Jessie said. He kicked chunks of snow from behind the front tire. "Let's see if we can get her moving." He opened the driver's-side door and scooted into the seat. Putting the Saturn into reverse, Jessie hit the gas. The wheels spun. Andrew stood in the space they'd cleared and pushed on the front

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end of the car. It shuddered and dislodged itself from the snowbank. A springtime wave of relief flooded through him—he would get home after all. His body was numb. Andrew wanted Kelly's warmth pressed against him. He gave his savior two thumbs up and stumbled through the snow toward the Saturn, which was still rolling backward. The car straightened out onto the highway and accelerated. "Thanks, Jessie!" Andrew called, but the Saturn didn't stop. With weighted legs, Andrew ran after his car. He gained on it for a moment, as the back wheels started to slide out, but then traction caught, and he was left alone.

Andrew stood, sweat-drenched, in the middle of the road. His toes pruned inside their soggy socks as dawn bled through the clouds. Independent of his will, numb feet dragged him toward Jessie's abandoned car, but he found no help there. All the Oldsmobile's doors were locked. The violet-swollen eye, the spots of browning blood that reflected back to him in the car window felt familiar. Andrew clapped his hands together and bounced on the balls of his feet, and blood pricked him awake.

He scooped up a handful of the clean snow and licked it. The water's ice-bite revived the sticky slug of his tongue. It slid down his throat and pooled in his stomach, and he felt alive. Sucking a new handful, he turned and started for home, his shuffling footsteps tracing the path back to Kelly that he hoped was still there, hidden beneath the snow. ●

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An Early Christmas

by Doug Allyn

Jared snapped awake to the sound of laughter. On the bedside TV, Jay Leno was yukking it up with a ditzy blond celeb. Jared sat up slowly, dazed and groggy from too much brandy, too much sex. Fumbling around, he found the remote control and killed the tinny TV cackling, then looked around slowly, trying to get his bearings.

A bedroom. Not his own. Sunny Lockhart was sprawled beside him, nude, snoring softly with her mouth open, her platinum hair a tousled shambles. At forty-nine, Sunny had crow's-feet and smile lines, but her breasts were D-cup and she made love like a teenybopper. Better, in fact.

Over the years *EQMM* has published a number of stories by Doug Allyn set at Christmas. This one is darker than most, but like all of the Michigan author's tales it's got some truly engaging characters whom readers will want to see again. Mr. Allyn is an eight-time winner of the *EQMM* Readers Award, a short-story Edgar winner and multiple Edgar nominee, and a well-reviewed mystery novelist. †

Gratitude sex. The best-kept secret in the legal profession. After settling cases involving serious money, clients were often elated, horny, and very, very grateful to the guy who made it happen.

Thanks to Jared's legal expertise, Sunny Lockhart was financially set for life, a free and independent woman of means. Unfortunately, she was also crowding fifty. Too old for Jared by a dozen years. And he had to be in the office to meet with a client at nine sharp.

Damn. Time to go.

Stifling a groan, Jared slid silently out of Sunny's rumpled bed and began gathering up his clothes.

Roaring down the shore road in his Mercedes SL500 through a gentle snowfall, Jared set his radio on scan, listening to the momentary snippets of songs flashing past. Mostly Christmas carols or country. Finally caught a tune he liked. "Back in Black," AC/DC. Cranking the volume, he slapped the wheel on the back beat, getting an energy surge from the music.

Couldn't stop grinning, wondering if he could arrange a weekend getaway with Sunny. Getting hot and bothered again just thinking about it.

He paid no attention to the rust-bucket pickup truck rumbling down the side road to his left. Until he realized the truck wasn't slowing for the stop sign. The crazy bastard was speeding up, heading straight for him!

Stomping his brakes, Jared swerved over onto the shoulder, trying to avoid a crash. Knowing it was already too late.

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Blowing through the intersection at eighty, the pickup came howling across the centerline, sheering off at the last second to slam broadside into Jared's roadster, smashing him off the road.

Airbags and the windshield exploded together, smothering Jared in a world of white as the Benz plowed through the massive snowdrift piled along the highway, then hurtled headlong down the steep embankment.

Wrestling through the airbag's embrace, Jared fought the wheel, struggling to control the roadster in its downhill skid. He managed to avoid one tree, then glanced off another. For a split second he thought he might actually make it—but his rear fender clipped a towering pine, snapping the car around, sending it out of control, tumbling end over end down the slope.

Bouncing off tree trunks like a pinball, the Benz was being hammered into scrap metal. The side windows shattered inward, spraying Jared with glass fragments. For a heart-freezing instant, he felt the car go totally airborne, then it slammed down nose-first into the bottom of the gorge with stunning force.

A lightning strike of white-hot agony flashed up Jared's spine, driving his breath out in a shriek. Freezing him in place. Afraid to breathe, or even blink, for fear of triggering the godawful pain again.

Christ. He couldn't feel his legs. Didn't know what was wrong with them, but knew it was serious. Total numbness meant his back might be broken or—

"Mister?" A voice broke through Jared's terrified daze. "Can you hear me down there?"

"Yes!" Jared gasped.

"Hey, I saw what happened. That crazy bastard never even slowed down. Are you okay?"

"I—can't move," Jared managed. "I think my back may be broken. Call nine-one-one."

"Already did. Hang on, I've got a first-aid kit in my car."

Unable to risk turning his head, Jared could only catch glimpses in his shattered rearview mirror of a dark figure working his way down the steep, snowy slope, carrying a red plastic case. Twice, the man stumbled in the roadster's torn tracks, but managed to regain his balance and press on.

As he drew closer, the mirror shards broke the image into distorted fragments, monstrous and alien. . . . Then he vanished altogether.

"Are you there?" Jared gasped, gritting his teeth. Every word triggered a raw wave of pain.

"Almost. Stay still." The voice came from somewhere behind the wreck. Jared couldn't see him at all.

"You're Jared Bannan, the real-estate lawyer, right?"

"Do I know you?"

No answer. Then Jared glimpsed the twisted figure in the mirror again. Climbing back up the track the way he'd come.

"Wh—where are you going? I need help!"

"I can't risk it." The figure continued on without turning. "Your gas tank ruptured. Can't you smell it? Your car could go off like a bomb any second."

"But—" Jared coughed. My God. The guy was right! The raw stench of gasoline was filling his nostrils, making it hard to breathe.

"Wait! Come back, you sonofabitch! Don't leave me! I have money! I'll pay you!"

At the mention of money, the climber stopped and turned around. But in the

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tree shadows, Jared still couldn't make out his face.

"That's more like it," Jared said. "I'll give you ten thousand dollars. Cash. Just get me out of this car and—"

"Ten grand? Is that all you're worth?"

"No! I mean, look, I'll give you whatever you want. . . ."A flash of light revealed the climber's face for a split second. Definitely familiar. Someone Jared had met or . . . His mind suddenly locked up, freezing with soul-numbing horror.

The flash was a flame. The climber had lit a cigarette. "Oh, Jesus," Jared murmured softly, licking his lips. "What are you doing? Wait. Please."

"Jesus?" the climber mimicked, taking a long drag. "Wait? Please? Is that the best you can do? I thought shysters were supposed to be fast talkers."

Jared didn't answer. Couldn't. He watched in growing terror as the smoker tapped the ashes off, bringing the tip to a cherry glow. Then he flipped the cigarette high in the air, sending it arcing through the darkness, trailing sparks as it fell.

Jared's shriek triggered another bolt of agony from his shattered spine, but he was beyond caring. He couldn't stop screaming any more than he could stop the cigarette's fiery fall.

Leaving his unmarked patrol car at the side of the highway, Doyle Stark trotted the last hundred yards along the shoulder to the accident scene. A serious one, by north-country standards. A Valhalla County fire truck was parked crossways across one lane of the highway, blocking it. Two uniformed sheriff's deputies, Hurst and VanDuzen, were directing traffic around the truck on the far shoulder. Van flipped him a quick salute and Doyle shot him with a fingertip.

Yellow police-line tapes stretched from both bumpers of the fire truck to stakes planted in the roadside snowdrifts. The tapes outlined a savage gap in the snowy embankment, over the top and on down out of sight.

Detective Zina Redfern was squatting at the rear of the fire truck, warming her mittened hands in the heat of its exhaust pipe. She was dressed in her usual Johnny Cash black: black nylon POLICE parka over a turtleneck and jeans, a black watch cap pulled down around her ears. The woman took the term "plain-clothes officer" literally. Even her combat boots were the real deal, LawPro Pursuits with steel toes. With a Fairbairn blade clipped to her right ankle.

"Sergeant Stark," she nodded, straightening up to her full, squared-off five foot five, one forty. "Whoa, what happened to your eye?"

Six foot and compactly built, with sandy hair and gray eyes, Doyle was sporting a white bandage over his left brow.

"Reffing a Peewee pickup game," Doyle said. "Ten-year-olds watch way too much hockey on TV. What happened here?"

"A car crashed through the embankment, tumbled all the way to the bottom, then blew up and burned down to the frame. What's left of the driver is still inside. Beyond that, I'm not sayin' squat. I need you to see this with fresh eyes."

"Fair enough." Doyle nodded, picking up the edge in her tone. Zina had worked in Flint for four years before transferring north to the Valhalla force. She was an experienced investigator, and if something was bothering her about this. . . .

He swiveled slowly, taking in the accident scene as a steady stream of traffic crawled past on the far shoulder. Wide-eyed gawkers, wondering what was up. Doyle knew the feeling.

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Two sets of broad black skid marks met in the center of the lane, then followed an impossible angle to the torn snowbanks at the side of the road. "Who called this in?"

"A long-haul trucker spotted the wreckage as he crested the hill, around ten this morning. We caught a real break. The wreck's not visible from the roadside. If we'd gotten a little more snow during the night, the poor bastard might have stayed buried till spring. I marked off a separate trail away from the skid track," she said, leading him to a rough footpath up and over the berm. "There are footprints that . . . well, take a look for yourself."

Clambering to the top of the drift, Doyle stopped, scanning the scene below. A ragged trail of torn snow and shattered trees led down the slope to a charred obscenity crouched at the bottom of the gorge. A burned-out hulk that had once been an expensive piece of German automotive engineering.

The charred Mercedes Benz was encircled by a blackened ring of torn earth and melted slush, its savagery already softening beneath a gentle gauze of lightly falling snow.

Joni Javitz, the Joint Investigative Unit's only tech, was hunched over the car, dutifully photographing the corpse. Even at this distance, Doyle could see the gaping mouth and bared teeth of the Silent Scream, a burn victim's final rictus. A few patches of skull were showing through the blackened flesh. . . .

Damn. He hated burn scenes. The ugly finality and the vile stench that clung to your clothing for days. In Detroit, cops called them Crispy Critters. But here in the north, no one in Doyle's unit joked about them. There's nothing funny about a death by fire. Ever.

Working his way warily down the slope, Doyle noted the uneven footprints in the snow of the roadster's trail. "Did the trucker climb down to the car?"

"The trucker didn't stop," Zina said. "He spotted the wreck and a little smoke. Wasn't sure what it was, but thought somebody should take a look."

"It was still smoking at ten o'clock? Any idea when this happened, Joni?"

"My best guess would be around midnight, boss, give or take an hour," Javitz said without turning. Tall and slender as a whip, she had to fold herself into a question mark to shoot the wreck's interior. "The car and the body are both cool to the touch now, but they're still ten degrees warmer than the ambient temperature. The State Police Crime Scene team is already en route from Gaylord. They should be here any time."

"Okay . . ." Doyle said, swiveling slowly, taking in the scene. "We've got a hotshot in a Benz roadster who runs off the road at midnight, crashes and burns. Tough break for him. Or her?"

"Him, definitely," Joni said.

"Fine. Him, then. And why exactly am I here on my day off?"

Wordlessly, Joni stepped away from the car, revealing the charred corpse and the deep crease in the driver's-side door.

"Wow," Doyle said softly, lowering himself to his haunches, studying the dent more closely. "Metal on metal. Red paint traces. No tree did this. Which explains the second set of skid marks on the highway. Somebody ran this poor bastard off the road . . ." He broke off, eyeing a small circle of dark red droplets, scattered like a spray of blood near the trunk.

"Plastic pellets?" Doyle said. "Any chance they're from the taillights?"

"Nope, the taillight lenses are Lexan," Joni said. "These pellets are definitely

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polypropylene, probably from a plastic gas container. A small one, a gallon or two. Like you'd use for a chainsaw or a lawnmower. The can was definitely on the ground outside the vehicle. I've already bagged up some residue to test for accelerants."

"I didn't see any skid marks from the other vehicle until the last second, just before it struck the Benz," Doyle mused. "From the depth of these dents, both cars must have been traveling at one hell of a clip. So car number two runs the stop sign at high speed, nails the Benz dead center, hard enough to drive it through the snowdrifts . . ."

"He's damned lucky he isn't down here too," Zina said.

"Maybe it wasn't luck," Doyle said, staring up the incline toward the highway. "If he hadn't hit the Benz, he definitely would have blown through the berm himself. And there's not much traffic out here at night. So, either he ran that stop sign, drunk, asleep, whatever, and the Benz had the million to one bad luck to get in his way or . . . ?"

"He wasn't out of control at all." Zina nodded, following Doyle's gaze up the hillside. "You think he drilled him deliberately?"

"Tell you what, Detective, why don't you hoof it back up the hill and check out that side road for tire tracks or exhaust stains in the snow. See if car number two was sitting up there, waiting for the Benz to show."

"Jesus," Joni said softly. "You mean somebody rammed this poor bastard on purpose? Then climbed down with a gas can and lit him up?"

"I don't like it either, but it works," Doyle agreed grimly. "Have you identified him yet?"

"The car's registered jointly to Jared and Lauren Bannan, Valhalla address."

"Jared Bannan?" Doyle echoed, surprised. "Damn. I know this guy. I've played racquetball against him."

"A friend?"

"No, just a guy. He's an attorney, a transplant from downstate, works mostly in real estate."

"A yuppie lawyer?" Zina said. "Should I cancel the Crime Scene team?"

The door to the classroom was ajar. Doyle raised his fist to knock, then hesitated, surprised at the utter silence from within. Curious, he peered around the doorjamb. A tall, trim woman with boyishly short dark hair was addressing the class. Soundlessly. Her lips were moving, the fingers of both hands flickering, mediating an animated discussion with a dozen rapt teenagers, who were answering with equally adept sign language, their lips miming speech, but with no sound at all.

It was like watching an Olympic fencing match, silvery signals flashing too quickly for the eye to follow.

The woman glanced up, frowning. "Can I help you?"

"Sorry to intrude, ma'am. If you're Dr. Bannan, we need a few minutes of your time."

"I'm in the middle of a class."

"This really can't wait, ma'am."

"My God," Lauren said softly, "are you absolutely sure it's Jared?"

"The identification isn't final, but he was carrying your husband's identification and driving his car."

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"Jared wore a U of M class ring on his right hand," she offered. "Did the driver . . . ?"

Doyle nodded. They were in Dr. Bannan's office, a Spartan ten-by-ten box at Blair Center, the county magnet school for special-needs students. Floor to ceiling bookshelves on three sides, Dr. Bannan's diplomas and teaching awards neatly displayed on the fourth wall. No photographs, Doyle noted.

"I didn't see a wedding ring," Zina said. "Did he normally wear one?"

"We're separated," Lauren said. "God. I can't believe this."

"Are you all right, Dr. Bannan?" Doyle asked. "Can I get you a glass of water or something?"

"No, I'm . . . just a bit shaken. Do you have any idea what happened?"

"Your husband was apparently sideswiped on the shore road a few miles outside of town. Hit and run. His car went over a steep embankment, probably late last night. Midnight, maybe. He was pronounced dead at the scene. We're very sorry for your loss."

Lauren's mouth narrowed as she visibly brought her emotions under control. An elegant woman, Doyle thought. Slender as a willow, with dark hair, a complexion as exquisite as a porcelain doll.

But not fragile. She took the news of her husband's death like a prizefighter rocked by a stiff punch. Drawing within herself to camouflage the damage.

After a moment, she took a deep breath, and carefully straightened her jacket.

"You said someone ran Jared off the road. What happened to the other driver?"

"We don't know yet, ma'am. Do you know why your husband might have been on that road last night?"

"No idea. Jared and I separated last year. Except for conferences with our attorney, I rarely see him. Why?"

Zina glanced the question at Doyle, who nodded.

"Judging from the skid marks, the collision may not have been accidental," Zina said. "Do you know why anyone would want to harm your husband?"

"Whoa, back up a moment," Lauren said, raising her hand. "Are you saying someone deliberately rammed Jared's car?"

"We aren't certain yet, ma'am," Doyle said. "But the evidence does lean that way. At this point we're treating it as a possible homicide."

"For the record, would you mind telling us your whereabouts last night?" Zina asked.

Lauren glanced up at her sharply. "I was at home all evening. Alone. What are you implying?"

"Nothing, ma'am," Doyle put in. "It's strictly routine. We're not the enemy."

Lauren looked away a moment. "All right then. If you have questions, let's clear them up now."

"You said you separated last year?" Zina asked. "Have you filed for divorce?"

"We filed right after we separated. Last spring. March, I think."

"Do you have children?"

Lauren hesitated. "No. No children."

"Then help me out here, Dr. Bannan. Without children involved, you can get a no-fault divorce in sixty days, and I'm speaking from experience. Was your husband contesting the divorce?"

"Only the property settlement. Jared earns more than I do, so he felt he was entitled to more. He kept coming up with new demands."

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"Michigan's a community-property state," Doyle put in. "A wife's entitled to half, no matter who earns what."

"My husband is an attorney, Sergeant, though most of his work is in real estate. Fighting him in court wouldn't be cost-effective. We had our final meeting last Tuesday. He made an offer and I took it."

"But you weren't happy about it?" Zina said.

"Divorce seldom makes anyone happy."

"You're newcomers to the area, right?" Doyle asked. "When did you move north?"

"A little over two years ago."

"Why was that? The move, I mean?"

"Why?" Lauren blinked, but didn't answer.

That was a hit, Zina thought. Though she had no idea what it meant.

"I knew your husband in passing," Doyle offered, easing the silence. "I played racquetball against him a few times."

"And?" Lauren said, with an odd smile.

"And what? Why the smile?"

"Jared was the most competitive man I've ever known. Did he beat you, Sergeant?"

"As a matter of fact, he did. Twice."

"And did he cheat?"

"He didn't have to. He was quicker than I am. Why do you ask that?"

"Jared could be a very sore loser. I beat him at tennis once and he smashed his racquet to splinters in front of a hundred spectators. I filed for divorce a week later."

"Over a tennis match?" Zina asked, arching an eyebrow.

"It was such a childish display that I realized Jared was never going to grow up. And I was tired of waiting. I wanted out."

"And now you are," Zina said. "Will the accident affect your financial settlement?"

"I have no idea. Money always mattered more to Jared than to me."

"Money doesn't matter?" Zina echoed.

"I was buying my freedom, Detective. How much is that worth? Can we wrap this up? I have a class in five minutes."

"You might want to make other arrangements, Doctor," Doyle suggested. "Give yourself a break."

"Working with handicapped kids is a two-way street, Sergeant. It keeps your problems in perspective. The last thing I need is to sit around brooding."

"You're not exactly brooding, ma'am," Zina noted. "If you don't mind my saying, you're taking this pretty calmly."

"I deal with problems every day, Detective. Kids who will never hear music or their mother's voices, kids with abusive parents. Last week I had to tell an eight-year-old her chemotherapy regimen had failed and she probably won't see Christmas. So this is very hard news, but . . ." Lauren gave a barely perceptible shrug.

"That would be a lot harder," Zina conceded, impressed in spite of herself.

"And yet the sun also rises," Lauren said firmly. "Every morning, ready or not. Are we done?"

"Just a few final questions," Doyle said quickly. "Your husband had a string of traffic citations, mostly for speeding. Was he a reckless driver?"

"Jared never hit anyone, he had great reflexes. But every trip was Le Mans

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for him. I hated that car."

"Was he ever involved in conflicts with other drivers?"

"Road rage, you mean? His driving often ticked people off, but he seldom stopped to argue. It was more fun to leave them in the dust."

"Which brings us full circle to question number one," Doyle said. "Can you think of *anybody* who might wish to harm your husband?"

Lauren hesitated a split second. *Another hit*, Zina thought, though not as strong as the first.

"No one," Lauren said carefully. "Jared was a charming guy, as long as you weren't playing tennis or facing him in court. If he was having trouble with clients, his office staff would know more than I do. He's with Lehman and Greene."

"How about you, ma'am?" Doyle asked. "The Benz is jointly owned, so it's at least possible your husband wasn't the intended victim. Have you had any problems? Threats, a stalker, anything like that?"

"No."

"What about your students?" Zina asked. "Your schedule includes mentally challenged students as well as hearing-impaired. Are any of them violent? Maybe overly affectionate? Seems like there's a lot of teacher-student hanky panky in the papers."

Lauren met Zina's eyes a moment, tapping on the desk with a single fingernail.

"You two are really good," she said abruptly. "Usually the male plays the aggressive 'bad cop,' while the female plays the sympathetic sister. Reversing the roles is very effective."

"Thanks, I think," Zina said. "But you didn't answer the question."

"As I'm sure you're aware, Detective Redfern, some of my students have behavioral problems that keep them out of mainstream schools. But none of them would have any reason to harm Jared. Or me. Now if you don't mind, I'd like a minute alone before my next class. Please."

"Of course, ma'am," Doyle said, rising. "I apologize for the tone of our questions. We're sorry for your loss." He handed her his card. "If you think of anything, please call, day or night."

Zina hesitated in the doorway.

Lauren raised an eyebrow. "Something else, Detective?"

"That kid you mentioned? What did she say when you told her the cancer had come back?"

"She . . . asked her father if they could celebrate an early Christmas. So she could give her toys to her friends."

"Good God," Zina said softly. "How do you handle it? Telling a child a thing like that?"

"Some days are like triage on the *Titanic*, Detective," Lauren admitted, releasing a deep breath. "You protect the children as best you can. And at five o'clock, you go home, pour a stiff brandy, and curl up with a good book."

"And tomorrow, the sun also rises," Zina finished. "Every single day. Ready or not."

In the hallway, Doyle glanced at Zina. "What?"

"I hate having to tell the wives. The tears, the wailing. Rips your freakin' heart out."

"The lady's used to dealing with bad news."

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"She's also pretty good at dodge-ball. She echoed some questions to buy time before she answered. Or didn't answer at all."

"She's got degrees in psych and special ed. She's probably better at this than we are. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Her clothes were expensive but not very stylish. She's a good-looking woman, but she dresses like a schoolmarm."

"She *is* a schoolmarm, sort of. What are we, the fashion police now?"

"Nope, we're the damn-straight real po-leece, Sarge. I'm just saying a few things about that lady don't add up. If a toasted husband can't crack your cool, what would it take?"

"You think she might be involved in her husband's death?"

"I'll get back to you on that. Who's next?"

"She said Bannan's office staff would know about any threats."

"Argh, more lawyers," Zina groaned. "I'd rather floss with barbed wire."

The offices of Lehman, Barksdale, and Greene, Attorneys at Law, occupied the top floor of the old Montgomery Ward building in downtown Valhalla. Old Town, it's called now. The historic heart of the village.

The new big-box stores, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, and the rest, are outside the city limits, sprawling along the Lake Michigan shore like a frontier boomtown, fueled by new money, new people. High-tech émigrés from Detroit or Seattle, flocking to the north country to get away from it all. And bringing most of it with them.

But Old Town remains much as it was before World War II: brick streets and sidewalks; quaint, globular streetlamps. Nineteenth-century buildings artfully restored to their Victorian roots, cast-iron facades, shop windows sparkling with holiday displays, tinny carols swirling in the wintry air. Christmas in Valhalla.

Harbor Drive offers a marvelous view of the harbor and the Great Lake, white ice calves drifting in dark water out to the horizon and a hundred miles beyond.

Few of the locals give it a glance, but the two cops paused a moment, taking it in. They'd both worked the concrete canyons of southern Michigan, Detroit for Doyle, Flint for Zee, before returning home to the north. Beauty shouldn't be taken for granted.

Totally rehabbed during the recent real-estate push, the offices of Lehman and Greene were top-drawer now, an ultra-modern hive of glass cubicles framed in oak with ecru carpeting. Scandinavian furniture in the reception area, original art on the walls. Doyle badged the receptionist, who buzzed Martin Lehman, Jr., to the front desk. Mid thirties, with fine blond hair worn long, thinning prematurely. Casually dressed. Shirtsleeves and slacks, loafers with no socks. No tie, either. New Age corporate chic.

"How can I help you, Officer?"

"It's Sergeant, actually. I understand Jared Bannan works here?"

"He's one of the partners, yes. He missed a deposition this morning, though. Is there a problem?"

"Maybe we'd better talk in your office, Mr. Lehman. Wait here, Redfern. I'll call you if we need anything."

"Hurry up and wait." Zina sighed, leaning on the reception counter as Doyle and Lehman disappeared down the hallway. "Is there a coffee machine somewhere?"

"Over in the corner, I'll get—"

"Don't get up," Zina said. "You're on the job, I'm just hanging around. Can I

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get you a cup?"

"If you wouldn't mind," the receptionist said.

"My treat." Zina winked. "If working girls don't look out for each other, who will?"

"Jared dead? Good God," Lehman said, sinking into the Enterprise chair behind his antique desk. "We played golf last Saturday, I can't—"

He caught Doyle's look.

"We flew down to Flint, there's an indoor course there," Lehman said absently. "It doesn't seem possible. Jared had so much energy. . . . Had he been drinking?"

"Did he drink a lot?"

"Not really. He loved to party, though, and . . . look, I'm just trying to make sense of this."

"Join the club, Mr. Lehman. Your partner was apparently the victim of a hit-and-run that may have been deliberate. What kind of work did Mr. Bannan do here?"

"Real-estate cases, mostly. He was a fixer. He brokered deals, arranged financing, resolved legal problems. One of the best in the state. We were lucky to land him."

"But since at least one party's unhappy in most business deals—"

"You know that I can't discuss Jared's cases with you, Sergeant. Attorney/client privilege applies."

"I'm not asking for specifics."

"Even so, our firm's reputation for discretion—"

"*Listen up, Mr. Lehman!* Somebody rammed your buddy's car off the road, into a ravine. Where he freakin' *burned* to death. Get the picture?"

"Good Lord," Lehman murmured, massaging his eyes with his fingertips.

"I'm not asking you to violate privilege, but I do need a heads-up about any problem cases or clients that could have triggered this thing."

"That's not so easy. Jared specialized in difficult cases."

"Define difficult."

"Property cases where the parties are in conflict, foreclosures, or the disposal of assets during a divorce. Jared loved confrontations. He'd needle the opposition until they blew, then he'd file a restraining order or sue for damages, generally make their lives miserable until they settled."

"So he was what? Your hatchet man?"

"The best I ever saw," Lehman admitted. "The slogan on his office wall says *Refuse to Lose*. He rarely did."

"That kind of attitude might make him a lot of enemies."

"It also made a lot of money. Real-estate law is a tough game, and Jared's a guy you'd want on your team. Even if down deep, he scared you a little."

"Were you afraid of him?"

"I had no reason to be, we were colleagues. But in court or in negotiations, he was a ferocious opponent. No quarter asked or given."

"I get the picture." Doyle nodded. "Can you give me a quick rundown of any seriously unhappy customers?"

"Butch Lockhart would top the list," Lehman said, bridging his fingertips.

"The Cadillac dealer? Used to play linebacker for the Lions?"

"That's Butch. Jared represented Butch's ex-wife, Sunny, in a suit over their divorce settlement. He got their prenuptial agreement voided on a technicality

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and Sunny wound up with half of everything. Fourteen million for a six-year marriage."

"Wow. I'm guessing Butch is unhappy?"

"He threatened, and I quote, to 'tear Jared's head off and cram it up his ass' during a deposition. Looked angry enough to do it, too. Naturally, Jared got the blowup on video. Butch's lawyers settled the same day. But there's more. Jared and Sunny Lockhart . . ."

"Have been celebrating?"

"Banging his clients was almost a ritual with Jared," Lehman sighed. "And Sunny lives in Brookside. Jared may have been coming from her place last night."

"Is Butch Lockhart aware of their relationship?"

"I would assume so. Jared and Sunny haven't been subtle about it."

"Noted. Who else?"

"He recently brokered a deal for the Ferguson family. The three sons wanted to sell the family farm, the father didn't. Jared managed to get the old man declared incompetent. Mr. Ferguson threatened to kill him in open court, which clinched the case. Personally, I think the old man was dead serious."

"We'll look into it. Any others?"

Lehman hesitated, thinking. "Jared had a divorce case slated for final hearings next week. Emil and Rosie Reiser. They own the Lone Pine Boat Works on Point Lucien."

"What's the problem?"

"There's some . . . friction over the timing of the closing. Emil Reiser bought the boatyard ten years ago, built it up, married a local girl. They're splitting up and cashing out, but their daughter is very ill. Emil wanted to put everything on hold, but Jared has a buyer lined up who won't wait. The wife wants out immediately. Jared promised to make it happen."

"How?"

"I'm sorry, but that definitely falls under attorney/client privilege."

"Are you trying to tell me something, Counselor?"

"We both know the rules, Sergeant. I've already said more than I should."

"Fair enough. Lockhart, Ferguson, and Reiser are on the list. Who else?"

"Those are the top three. I'll scan through Jared's files, and flag any others that seem problematic."

"What about Bannan's wife? She said they're divorcing. Amicably?"

"No divorce is amicable, but they're both professional people. The discussions were *very* chilly, but civil. I'm handling—was handling—the paperwork for them."

"For both parties?" Doyle asked, surprised. "Isn't that unusual?"

"The only dispute was the terms of the settlement, and they hammered those out in meetings that I refereed. We wrapped it up last week."

"To everyone's satisfaction?"

"Jared was certainly satisfied. Lauren's harder to read. Jared and I have been friends since college. I could tell you the juicy details on every girlfriend he ever had, up to and including Sunny Lockhart. But I can't tell you a thing about his wife. He never talked about her. I do know that a few years ago, they had . . . a serious problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"That I truly don't know. But Jared had a *very* successful practice downstate, and we didn't recruit him, he called me up out of the blue. Said he wanted to

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make a fresh start."

"Trying to save his marriage?"

"Jared never took marriage all that seriously."

"How seriously did his wife take it? Should we be looking at her? Or a boyfriend?"

"Can't help you there, Sergeant. As I said, I simply don't know the lady well. I was surprised when I met her. She's a handsome woman, but not Jared's type at all. He liked them hot, blond, and bubbly and Lauren's the opposite. Cool, intelligent, and very private. I've seen more of her during the settlement conferences than I did the whole time they . . . sweet Jesus."

"What?"

"Their settlement isn't finalized." Lehman frowned. "We ironed out the details but nothing's been signed or witnessed."

"So? What's the problem?"

"It's void. All of it, even Jared's new will. As things stand, Lauren's still his wife and sole heir. She gets everything."

"How much are we talking about?"

"I really shouldn't—"

"Just a ballpark figure. Please."

"Very well. Property and investments would be . . . roughly two and a half mil. And Jared had a substantial life-insurance policy. I'd put the total estate in the neighborhood of five million."

"Nice neighborhood," Doyle whistled.

"I'm afraid that's really all I can tell you for the moment," Lehman said, rising. "I'll fax you the information on any problem clients by the end of business today."

"I'd appreciate it, Counselor. About Bannan's death being a possible homicide? That stays between us."

"God. I don't even like to think about it, let alone tell anyone else."

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Lehman. I'm sorry about your partner."

"So am I, Sergeant," Lehman said, shaking his head glumly. "So am I."

Zina was waiting for Doyle on the sidewalk. "What'd you get?" she asked, falling into step as they headed for the SUV.

"A lot. Bannon was having an affair with Sunny Lockhart and half of his other clients, his life's been threatened at least twice, recently, and his widow stands to inherit five million. How'd you make out with the receptionist?"

"Same basic story. Bannan wasn't doing her, but he certainly could have. He was a killer negotiator who loved ticking off the opposition. He also got into a major shouting match with his partner last week."

"With Lehman? About what?"

"The receptionist wasn't sure; those flashy glass offices may look wide open but they're soundproof. A couple called Reiser had just left, and Dr. Bannan was waiting in reception. The argument could have been about either of them."

"Or something else altogether."

"Whatever it was, she said Bannan and Lehman were shouting loud enough to rattle the glass."

"Not loud enough, apparently. What else?"

"Bannan's clients loved him, in every sense of the word, especially the ladies. I'm feeling a little wistful that he never gave me a call."

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"You hate lawyers."

"Only divorce lawyers. What's next?"

"One of the threats to Bannan's life came from Butch Lockhart. Let's take the Lockharts separately, before they have time to cross-check their stories. I'll charm Sunny, you dazzle Butch."

"Can't I just beat it out of him?" Zina said. "The Lions sucked when Lockhart played for 'em."

"You're kidding?" Butch Lockhart grinned hugely, not bothering to conceal his delight. "That mouthy sumbitch is dead? For sure?"

"I'm afraid so," Zina said, eyeing him curiously. They were in Lockhart's office, a glass cubicle five steps up from the showroom floor, which overlooked a gleaming row of Cadillacs that stretched the length of a football field. Lockhart loomed even larger than in his playing days, fifty pounds heavier now, a behemoth in a tailored silk suit, tinted glasses, tinted dark hair. A smile too perfect to be real.

"What kind of a car was he driving?" Lockhart asked.

"A Mercedes roadster."

"Better and better. A smart-ass yuppie buys it in his Kraut car. If he'd been driving a Caddy, he could've survived the accident."

"Actually, we don't think it *was* an accident, Mr. Lockhart. He was clipped by a hit-and-run driver. Would you mind telling me your whereabouts between ten and midnight last night?"

Lockhart stared at her, blinking, as the question penetrated his bullet skull. "Whoa, wait a minute, Shorty. Why ask me? What the hell, you think *I* killed him?"

"You did threaten to tear Mr. Bannan's head off in front of witnesses—"

"Maybe I would have, if I'd run into him in a bar after I'd had a few. But I didn't. And if I wanted him dead, I wouldn't need a car to do it. It's bad enough I had to take crap from that punk while he was alive, I'll be damned if I'll take any more now that he's toast. Especially from some backwoods taco bender. Get the hell out of my office."

"Actually, I'm not Latin, sir, I'm Native American," Zina said, rising. "Anishnabeg. And you're not required to answer questions without an attorney. No problem. I'll be happy to clear your name another way. How many red Cadillacs do you have in stock?"

"Red? What are you talking about?"

"The vehicle that struck Mr. Bannan's car left red paint scrapes on his door. I can just scrape paint samples from every red vehicle on your lots, then ship 'em to Lansing to see if any of them match. I'm sure your body shop can touch them up, good as new."

"Touch 'em up?" Butch echoed, standing up, towering over her. "Look, you little beaner—" He broke off, staring at the gleaming blade of the boot knife Zina slid out of her ankle sheath.

"I see two red Caddies out on your showroom floor," she continued calmly. "I'll just scrape some paint samples on my way out. Unless you'd like to be the sweet guy I know you really are and tell me where the hell you were last night, Mr. Lockhart. Sir."

"He was banging his new girlfriend," Zina sighed, dropping into the chair at her desk. "A high-school cheerleader, no less." They were in the Mackie Law

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Enforcement Center, a brown brick blockhouse just outside Valhalla, named for a trooper killed by a psycho survivalist during a routine traffic stop.

Covering a five-county area, "the House" is shared by Valhalla P.D., the Sheriff's Department, and the Joint Investigative Unit. Amicably, for the most part.

"How old is the girl?"

"Eighteen. Street legal, but just barely. She confirmed Lockhart's story. I politely suggested she might want to try dating guys her own age. She told me to stick my advice in the trunk of her brand new Escalade. Paid-up lease, thirty-six months."

"She's eighteen and he's what? Forty?"

"Men are pond scum. I may have to switch to girls. What'd you get from Lockhart's ex?"

"Bannan was with her last night. They ate a late dinner, then thoroughly enjoyed each other's company. She fell asleep afterward. Her best guess is, he bailed out sometime after eleven. She has no alibi, but no motive, either. He made her rich and she was in love with the guy."

"Or in heat," Zee said. "Scratch both Lockharts then, who does that leave?"

"Old Man Ferguson can't be too happy about being declared incompetent. And the Reisers, who have some kind of a beef over their scheduling. Plus pretty much everybody Jared Bannan ever met. The guy loved ticking people off."

"You're forgetting the widow. Five mil's a helluva motive, Doyle, and she definitely ducked some of our questions."

"Lehman said their relationship was pretty chilly. What did you make of her?"

"Same as you. She's smart, has great legs, and she's about to have five mil in the bank. Hey, maybe I will switch to girls. You want me to re-interview her while you run down Ferguson?"

"No, let's try the Reisers first. The boat works will close in an hour."

The Lone Pine boatyard was on the tip of Point Lucien, an isolated peninsula jutting into Grand Traverse Bay. A narrow, two-lane blacktop was the only access.

"Not much development out here," Zina noted. "Can't be many private shoreline sites left."

"Which should make the Reisers a bundle when they sell," Doyle said, wheeling the cruiser into the small parking lot. Switching off the engine, they sat a moment, listening to the lonely lapping of the waves and the cries of the gulls.

The yard wasn't much to look at. The only buildings were a cabin, a curing shed stacked with drying lumber, and the boat works itself, a long warehouse surrounded by a deck that extended out over the water, built of rough-hewn timbers culled from the surrounding forest.

A young girl was huddled in a lawn chair at the end of the dock, fishing with a cane pole, an ancient Labrador Retriever at her feet. The dog raised its head, growling a warning as the two officers approached.

"Shush, Smokey," the girl said. "Daaa-ad! The police are here. Have you been bad again?" Her impish grin faded into a spate of coughing. She was muffled in a heavy parka, though the temperature on the point was a full ten degrees warmer than the inland hills. Lake effect. Her head was swathed in a turban against the cold, and to cover her baldness.

"Something I can do for you folks?" Emil Reiser asked, stepping out to meet them. He was a bear of a man, dressed for blue-collar work, red-and-black

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checked flannel shirt, jeans, and cork boots. He needed a shave and his wild salt-and-pepper mane hung loosely to his shoulders. Two fingertips on his left hand were missing.

"Don't mind the dog, he's harmless, mostly. Is this business or pleasure?"

"It's business, Mr. Reiser."

"Yeah? Buying a boat, are you? 'Cause that's the only business I'm in."

"Actually, it's about your wife's attorney, Jared Bannan."

"Hell, what does that bastard—" Reiser broke off, glancing at his daughter, who was watching them intently. He flashed her a quick command in sign language and the girl turned away.

"She's hearing-impaired?" Doyle asked.

"Among other things." Reiser sighed. "We'd better talk inside. That kid can eavesdrop at fifty yards."

Reiser's workshop was like stepping back in time. The long room had four wooden hulls on trestles, in various states of completion. The air was redolent of sawdust, wood shavings, and shellac. Not a power tool in sight. But for the bare bulbs dangling from the ceiling beams, the works could have time-traveled from the last century. Or the one before that.

Zina wandered between the boats, running her hand over the hulls.

"Beautiful," she murmured. She paused in front of a rifle rack against the wall that held a dozen long guns, scoped Springfields and Remingtons, plus a pair of '94 Winchester lever-action carbines. "Expecting a war, Mr. Reiser?"

"They're hunting guns, miss."

"What do you hunt?"

"I don't, anymore. I build boats. And don't be wanderin' around back there. Workshops can be dangerous."

"Is that how you lost your fingertips?" Zina asked, rejoining them.

"My fingers?" Reiser glanced at them, as if he was surprised they were missing. "Yeah. Bandsaw, couple of years ago."

"Looks like it hurt," Doyle said.

"Compared to what?" Reiser snapped. "Your eye don't look so hot either, sport. Can we get on with this? I got work to do."

"I understand you had a beef with Jared Bannan?" Doyle said.

"My wife and I are breaking up. God knows, we've had enough trouble the past few years to wreck anybody. I got no beef with Rosie taking half of everything, though she's been doing more drinkin' than workin' lately. When this is over, I'll probably get drunk for a month myself."

"When what's over?"

"Our daughter is dying," Reiser said bluntly. "Cancer. You'd think being born deaf would be enough grief for any child, but . . ."He trailed off, swallowing hard.

"I'm sorry," Doyle said. "Truly."

"It can't be helped," Reiser said grimly. "All I asked from Bannan was a few extra months, so Jeanie could be at home until . . . her time. Rosie was okay with it, but Bannan said he had a big-bucks buyer lined up who wouldn't wait. Then Rosie's drunk-ass boyfriend put in his two cents. If Marty Lehman hadn't broken things up I swear I would've pounded 'em both to dog meat. But I never laid a hand on either of 'em. If Bannan claims I did, he's lying."

"Mr. Bannan isn't claiming anything," Doyle said mildly, watching Reiser's face. "He's dead. His car was run off the road last night."

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"Jesus," Reiser said, combing his thick mane back out of his face with his shortened fingertips. "Look, I had no use for the guy, but I had no cause to harm him."

"Not even to get the extra time you wanted?" Zina asked.

"We already worked that out. My wife'll tell you."

"Where is she?"

"Stayin' at the Lakefront Inn, in town. On my dime. With her speed-freak boyfriend, Mal La Roche."

"We know Mal." Doyle nodded. "Would you mind telling us where you were last night?"

"Here with Jeanie, where else? You can ask her if you want, just don't upset her, okay? She's got enough to deal with."

"We'll take your word for it, Mr. Reiser. No need to bother the girl. Thanks for your time. And we're very sorry for your trouble."

Zina craned around to take a long look back as they pulled out of the boatyard. Reiser was at the water's edge, standing beside his daughter, his hand on her shoulder. Talking intently on a cell phone.

"We'll take your word for it?" she echoed, swiveling in her seat to face Doyle.

"As sick as that kid is, she probably goes to bed early, and she's hearing-impaired. How would she know whether Reiser went out? What did you make of him?"

"An edgy guy with a world of trouble. Given his state of mind, I wouldn't want to get crossways of him right now. You think his daughter's the kid Dr. Bannan mentioned? The one who wanted an early Christmas?"

"She's deaf, and the Blair Center is the only school for special-needs students. Check with the school when we get back to the House. Meantime, we'll talk to Reiser's wife, confirm his story."

"Or not," Zina said.

"Rosie don't want to talk to you," Mal La Roche said, blocking the motel-room doorway, has massive arms folded. Shaggy and unshaven, Mal was a poster boy for the cedar savages, backwoodsmen who still live off the land, though nowadays they're more likely to be growing reefer or cooking crank than running trap lines. Mal has two brothers and a dozen cousins rougher than he is. Every cop north of Midland knows them by their first names.

"This isn't a roust, Mal, it's a murder case," Doyle explained. "We need to ask the lady a few questions, then we're gone."

"Or we can pat you down for speed," Zina added. "You look jumpy to me, Mal. Been tootin' your own product again?"

"I ain't—"

"It's all right, Mal, I'll talk to them." Rosie Reiser pushed past Mal. Bottle blond and blowsy, in a faded bathrobe, she looked defeated. And half in the bag. "Out here, though, not inside. Things are a mess in there. Is this about Bannan?"

"Your husband called you?" Doyle asked.

She nodded. "He said you might be by."

"Did he also tell you what to say?"

"I don't need him for that!" Rosie said resentfully. "I'm here, ain't I?"

"So you are," Zina said, glancing pointedly around at the rundown motel cabin, "though I can't imagine why. Your daughter—"

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"Is where she needs to be! With her father, by the damn lake. His little princess. It's always about her! Has been since she was born. Never about me."

"Okay, what about you?" Zina said coolly. "Is this dump where you should be?"

"Just ask your questions and git!" Mal put in. We don't need no lectures."

"What was the beef between your husband and Jared Bannan?" Doyle asked.

"It's over and done with."

"I didn't ask if it was settled. I asked what it was about?"

"It . . ." Rosie blinked rapidly, trying to focus through a whiskey haze. "I don't know. Something about . . . Emil wanted to wait until after Jeanie . . . you know."

"Dies?" Zina prompted coldly. "And Bannan had a problem with that?"

"He had some big-shot buyer lined up, but they wanted to break ground right away," Mal put in. "It's taken care of now, though. Jared and Emil worked it out."

"How?" Doyle asked.

"I don't know the details."

"Who was the buyer?"

"We don't *know!*" Rosie snapped. "I just know it's settled."

"Because your husband said so?"

"Screw this, I don't have to talk to you. You want to arrest me, go ahead."

"Why would we arrest you?" Doyle asked, puzzled.

"That's what you do, ain't it? So get to it or take a hike." She thrust out her wrists, waiting for the cuffs.

"We're sorry for your trouble, ma'am," Doyle sighed. "Have a nice day."

Zina started to follow him to the car, then turned back.

"Mrs. Reiser? It's none of my business, but losing a child must be incredibly difficult. You might want to wait a bit before you throw away your marriage for the likes of Mal La Roche."

"Hey," Mal began, "you can't—"

"Shut up, Mal, or I'll kick your ass into next week. Mrs. Reiser—"

"Butt out, Pocahontas," Rosie said, clutching La Roche's arm protectively. "At least Mal can show me a good time. Just because Emil's got no life don't mean *I* gotta live like a damn hermit."

"No, I guess not." Zee shrugged. "You're right, ma'am. You're exactly where you belong."

"It's the same kid," Zina said, hanging up her phone. "Jeanie Reiser is enrolled at Blair Center. Or was. A special-needs student, hearing-impaired. She was taken out of school a few weeks ago, because of health issues."

They were in their office at the House.

"Which means Dr. Bannan knows Emil Reiser," Doyle mused. "Interesting."

"Interesting how?" Zina snorted. "Like *Strangers on a Train?* He kills her husband and . . . Who does she kill? Mal La Roche? Besides, neither one of 'em has an alibi."

"Maybe they aren't as tricky as the guys in the movie."

"Yep, that sounds like the doc all right. Dumb as a box of rocks."

"That's not what I—"

"Glad I caught you," Captain Kazmarek interrupted, poking his head in the door. Fifty and fit, "Cash" Kazmarek bossed the Investigations unit. An affable politician, he was also a rock-solid cop, twenty-five years on the Tri County Force. "I got a call from the sheriff's department at Gaylord. They have your

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truck. Red Ford pickup, passenger's-side front fender damaged, reported stolen yesterday. Found it an hour ago, abandoned in a Wal-Mart parking lot. What the hell happened to your eye?"

"Hockey game," Doyle said. "Did the security cameras catch anything?"

"Nope. The driver dumped it behind a delivery van to avoid the cameras. No prints, either. None. Wiped clean, they said."

"A professional?" Zina asked.

"Could be," Kazmarek said, dropping into the chair beside Doyle's desk. "Or maybe some buzzed-up teenager with more luck than brains. Where are you on this thing?"

"We've got suspects, but it's a fairly long list," Doyle said. "Bannan majored in making enemies. Why?"

"Actually, a matter of overlapping jurisdictions has come up. I want you to drop a name to the bottom of your list."

"Let me guess," Zina said. "Dr. Lauren Bannan?"

"Lauren?" Kazmarek asked, surprised. "Is she a suspect?"

"The wife's always a suspect. Why, do you know her?"

"We've met. She's done some counseling for the department."

"No kidding? Who'd she shrink?" Zee asked.

"None of your business, Detective. And Lauren's not the name we need to move anyway. According to my sources, Emil Reiser has an ironclad alibi for that night."

"What alibi?" Doyle asked. "He claimed he was home alone with his sick kid. There's no way to verify that."

"Consider it verified," Cash said, rising briskly. "As far as we're concerned, Mr. Reiser was at the policemen's ball, waltzing with J. Edgar Hoover in a red dress."

"Hoover?" Zina echoed. "Are you saying the Feds want us to lay off Reiser?"

"I didn't mention the Feds, because a snotty FBI agent in Lansing asked me not to," Cash said mildly. "That crack about Hoover must have been a Freudian thing. Forget you heard it. Clear?"

"Crystal. Does this mean Reiser is totally off limits, Captain?"

"Not at all, this is a murder case, not a traffic stop. Just make sure you exhaust *all* other avenues of investigation before you look at Reiser again. And if you come up with solid evidence against him, I'll want to see it before you go public. Any questions?"

"You're the boss," Doyle said. "What about Mrs. Bannan?"

"I'd be surprised if Lauren's involved," Kazmarek said, pausing in the doorway. "But I'm obviously a lousy judge of character. I hired you two, didn't I?"

Zina and Doyle eyed each other a moment after Cash had gone.

"Federal," Doyle said at last.

"There's no way Reiser can be an informant," Zina said positively. "That boatyard's in the middle of nowhere and he's been out there for years."

"Which leaves WITSEC," Doyle agreed. "Witness protection."

"So Reiser gets a free pass just because he testified for the Feds once upon a time?"

"No way, in fact it makes him more interesting. But since he's officially at the bottom of our list now, let's see how fast we can work our way back down to him. Ferguson's the only suspect we haven't interviewed. We might want to look at Mal La Roche, too, just on general principles—"

"That's the second time you've done that," Zina said.

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"Done what?"

"Left the foxy doc off the list. She's got five million reasons to want her husband dead, Doyle. She's connected to Reiser and she definitely ducked some of our questions. Or maybe you didn't notice? Because you're a guy and the doc definitely isn't."

"That's crap!" Doyle snapped. "I'm not . . . " He broke off, meeting Zee's level gaze. Realizing there might just be a kernel of truth in what she said. As usual.

"Okay." He nodded. "Straight up, do you seriously think she killed her husband? Or had it done?"

"I don't know. Neither do you. But she was definitely holding something back. Maybe it's connected to her husband's death, maybe not, but if we're crossing names off our list, I think I should question her again. Alone, this time. Girl talk. Unless you've got some objection? Sergeant?"

Doyle scanned her face for irony. He'd been partnered with Zina Redfern since she transferred north. Nearly four years now. And he still had no idea how her mind worked. Nor any other woman's mind, for that matter.

"Hell, go for it, Zee. Seeing a shrink might do you some good. Just be careful she doesn't have you committed."

"Screw that. I'm more worried about getting torched in my car."

Lauren Bannan delayed making the phone call as long as she could. She meant to make it after lunch, but wound up working at her desk well into the afternoon.

So she swore to make it the last call of the business day. Then forgot again. Sort of.

But when she stepped into the kitchen of the small lakefront cottage she'd leased after her separation, she knew she couldn't delay any longer. And like most tasks we dread, it wasn't as difficult as she'd feared.

Nearly eighty now, Jared Bannan's mother had been in a rest home in Miami for years. She was used to receiving bad news. In the home, it came on a daily basis.

"Don't make a big fuss over the funeral, Lauren," she quavered. "Jared never cared a fig for religion and I won't be coming. I'm sorry, but I'm simply not up to it. Hold whatever service you feel is appropriate, then send his ashes to me. He can be on the mantel, beside his father. I'll be seeing them both before long. How are you holding up, my dear?"

And Lauren started to cry. Tears streaming silently as she listened to words of comfort from an elderly lady she hardly knew. And would never see again.

"I'm all right, Mother Bannan," she lied. "I'll be fine."

Afterward, she washed her face, made herself a stiff cup of Irish coffee, then sat down at her kitchen table to scan the Yellow Pages listings for funeral homes.

The doorbell rang.

Padding barefoot to her front door, Lauren checked the peephole, half expecting Marty Lehman. He'd been hinting about offering her a shoulder to cry on—

But it wasn't.

"Detective Redfern," Lauren said, opening the door wide. "What can I do for Valhalla's finest?"

"Sorry to bother you at home, Dr. Bannan, but a few things have come up. Can you spare me a minute?"

"Actually, your timing's perfect, Detective. I have to choose a funeral home for Jared's service. Can you recommend one?"

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"McGuinn's downtown handles the department funerals." Zina followed Lauren through the living room to the kitchen, glancing around the small apartment. It was practically barren. She'd seen abandoned homes that looked friendlier. "Love what you've done with the place."

"I'm still living out of boxes in the garage," Lauren admitted. "I took the place for the view. The back deck overlooks the lake. Sit down, please. I'm having Irish coffee. Would you like some?"

"Coffee's fine, but hold the Irish, please." Zina took a chair at the kitchen table. "This isn't a social call."

"Good," Lauren said, placing a steaming mug in front of Zina, sitting directly across from her. "I wouldn't know how to deal with a social call. Our friends were mostly Jared's business buddies. What do you need, Detective?"

"You sure you're up for this? You seem a bit . . . distracted."

"This hasn't been a day to relive in my golden years, but I'm not a china doll, either. Cut to the chase, please."

"Fair enough. We've got an ugly murder on our hands, and you're screwing up our case."

"In what way?"

"By lying to us or withholding information."

"Holy crap," Lauren said, sipping her coffee. "That's pretty direct."

"You're not a china doll."

"No, I'm not," Lauren said, taking a deep breath. "I'm a special-ed teacher and counselor, licensed by the state and prohibited by federal law from divulging information obtained in my work. To anyone."

"Are you trying to tell me you know who killed your husband?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"But you know something?"

"Nothing that directly relates to Jared's death. And nothing I can discuss with you in any case."

"Reality check, Doc. A fair amount of evidence points directly at you. Shut us out and you could end up in a jackpot that can wreck your life, guilty or not."

"I'll help you in any way I can."

Leaning back in her chair, Zee sipped her coffee, reading Lauren's face openly. "All right. Let's hit the high spots. In our first interview, Doyle asked why you moved north. You ducked that question. Why was that?"

Lauren glanced away a moment, then met Zina's eyes straight on. "Jared and I needed a fresh start after the death of our son," she said flatly. "Jared Junior was born with a congenital heart defect. He lived five months. We hoped a new place might help. It didn't."

"I'm sorry."

"It was four years ago. I didn't become a counselor because I'm a good person who wanted to help others, Detective. I was only trying to save myself."

"How's it going?"

"A day at a time. Next question?"

"The big one. When Doyle asked who might have cause to hurt your husband, you hesitated."

"Did I?"

"You just did it again. Are you protecting someone?"

"I'm sorry," Lauren said, shaking her head slowly. "I can't."

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"You *can't? I* can't believe you'd protect a killer over some damned technicality. Give me a name! Hell, give me his initials!"

"I just told you, I can't!"

"Jesus H. Christ!" Zina said, rising from her chair, leaning across the table. "In Flint I worked gangland, lady. The east side. I've known some hardcore bangers, but I've never met a colder case than you. The guy may have killed your husband!"

"You'd better go, Detective."

"Damn right I'd better, before I slap the crap out of you. But I'm warning you, Doc, if anybody else gets hurt because you held out on us? I'll burn you down, swear to God!"

Doyle was at his desk when Zina stormed in.

"She definitely knows something, but won't give it up," Zina said, dropping into her seat, still seething. "What did you get?"

"More than I wanted to," Doyle said absently.

"About who? Ferguson?"

"The old man's been in the county psych ward for a week, for evaluation. Twenty-four seven observation. He's totally clear. So I ran Reiser through the Law Enforcement Information Net."

"Cash told us to lay off him."

"I didn't run his name, just his general description and those missing fingertips. Got a dozen possibles, but only one serious hit. A case I actually remembered, from twelve years ago in Ohio. I was a rookie on the Detroit force then. A Toledo hit man called The Jap rolled on the Volchek crime family, busted up a major drug ring. They wiped out his wife and kids as a payback."

"Nobody in our case is Japanese."

"Neither was the hit man. He got that nickname because he had some fingertips missing. Japanese Yakuza gangsters whack off their fingertips over matters of honor."

"Hell, Doyle, half my backwoods relatives are missing fingers or toes because they swing chainsaws for a living. That doesn't make 'em hit men."

"There's more. After the trial, the Jap disappeared. No mention of prison time, no updates on his whereabouts. Zip, zilch, nada."

"You think the Feds put him in the witness protection program?"

"Probably," Doyle agreed. "Let's say you've got a witness with a contract out on him. You can give him a new identity, even plastic surgery. But you can't grow his fingers back . . . "

"They stashed him in chainsaw country," Zina finished, "where nobody notices missing fingers. You think Reiser's this Jap?"

"I can't think of any other reason a backwoods boat builder would be waltzing with J. Edgar Hoover."

"And this hit man's daughter is in Dr. Bannan's school, so they almost certainly know each other. Do you think she knows who he really is?"

"I know they've been talking a lot," Doyle said. "I pulled her telephone LUDs. She calls the parents of her students occasionally, probably to discuss problems or progress. But over the past few months she's been talking to Emil Reiser several times a week."

"His daughter's dying."

"And as her teacher, the doc would naturally be concerned," Doyle nodded.

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"But they usually talk during business hours. She calls the shop or he calls the school. Except for last Tuesday. She called him at ten P.M. And two days later . . ."

"Somebody greased her husband," Zina whistled. "Wow. But can we move on this? Cash told us to lay off Rieser unless we had rock-solid evidence. All we've got is a possible connection between the doc and a possible hit man. And I guarantee she won't give anything up. That's one tough broad."

"Cash ordered us to give Emil Reiser a pass. He didn't say anything about *Mrs.* Reiser."

"Rosie was already half in the bag this afternoon," Zina agreed. "By now she's probably sloshed and looking for a shoulder to cry on."

But Rosie Reiser wasn't at the Lakefront Inn. Her boyfriend told them she'd been called to the hospital. An ambulance had brought Princess Jeanie to the emergency room an hour earlier.

D.O.A.

They found Rosie Reiser in the E.R. waiting room, alone and dazed, her hair a shambles, cheeks streaked with mascara like a mime's tears. Her eyes were as vacant as an abandoned building.

"Mrs. Reiser," Zina said, kneeling beside Rosie's chair. "We're very sorry for your loss. Can you tell us what happened?"

"Emil called. Said Jeanie was gone. She was fishin' off the end of the dock, that kid loved bein' outdoors . . . But she dropped her pole. And when Emil checked, she was . . ." Rosie took an unsteady breath. "He called the ambulance, they brought her here. They let me see her before they took her downstairs."

"Where's your husband now?" Doyle asked.

"He split. He knew when Jeanie died, the doc would give him up. Figured you'd come for him."

"You mean Dr. Bannan knows who he is?"

"Hell, she was the one that warned him. That bitch almost got me killed!"

"Warned him about what, Mrs. Reiser? What happened?"

"Our final hearing was coming up, Jared had a buyer lined up for the business, we could cash out and be gone. But Emil kept stalling, wanted to wait because of Jeanie. Him and Jared had a big blowout about it. After Emil stormed out, I told Jared about Emil being in witness protection, hiding out up here. Jared planned to out him in court, make Emil run for his damn life. That way I'd get everything, not just half."

"Clever plan," Zina said, her tone neutral.

"Marty Lehman didn't think so. He argued with Jared about it. Claimed Jared was an officer of the court, shouldn't give Emil up. Jared told him to screw himself. I thought we'd won. Then the doc tipped Emil what was up and he took Jared out. Told me if I opened my mouth, he'd do me and Mal the same way."

"How did Dr. Bannan find out about Emil?" Doyle asked. "Are they involved?"

"Involved?" Rosie echoed, puzzled.

"Are they lovers, Mrs. Reiser? Are they friends?"

"Hell, Emil's got no friends. We had to live like goddamn hermits out there." And she began to sob, great gasping yawps of self-pity.

"Mrs. Reiser, do you know where your husband might have gone?" Zina pressed.

"He went with Jeanie when they took her down. He didn't want her to be alone in that place."

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"What place—whoa, you mean the morgue? Doyle, the morgue's in the basement. Reiser's still here!"

But he wasn't. They found the morgue attendant sitting on the floor, in a daze, his skull bloodied. He said Reiser clipped him with a gun butt. He was gone. And he'd taken his daughter's body.

Lights and sirens, flying through town pedal to the metal, Doyle driving, Zina hanging on to the dashboard crash bar.

Turning onto the Point Lucien road, he switched off the sirens without slowing. Not that it mattered. Reiser would be expecting them.

"Eavesdropping," Zina said suddenly.

"What?"

"When we were out here before, the girl was fishing. Emil signed for her to turn her back. He said she could eavesdrop at fifty yards. But she was deaf."

"He meant she could read lips."

"That's right. And where would a kid learn to do that?"

Doyle risked a quick sidelong glance, then refocused on the road. "In school," he nodded. "Dr. Bannan teaches hearing-impaired kids and she was in the anteroom when her husband and Lehman were arguing about outing Reiser."

"In an office with glass walls," Zee finished. "The secretary couldn't hear them, but the doc could have picked up the gist of their argument. And warned Reiser."

"And Reiser killed her husband to—Sweet Jesus!" Doyle broke off. "What the hell is all that?"

Ahead of them, the sky was glowing red, dancing shadows flickering through the trees as Doyle whipped the patrol car around, skidding broadside into the Lone Pine parking lot.

The boat works was engulfed in flame, a seething, crackling inferno fueled by the stacks of dried wood. Black smoke and sparks roiling upward into the winter night. Backlit by the blaze, Emil Rieser was calmly watching the fire consume years of his work. And his daughter. His whole life.

As Doyle and Zina stepped out of the car, Reiser turned to face them, his work clothes blackened with soot, his shaggy mane wild. Holding a hunting rifle cradled in his arms.

Doyle carefully drew his own weapon, keeping it at his side.

"Mr. Reiser, we'd appreciate it if you'd put that gun down, and step away from it."

"Not a chance, Stark. Just give me a few minutes. Jeanie wanted her ashes scattered out here, this is my last chance to do for her. Let the fire go a bit longer, then we'll get to it."

"To what?" Zina asked.

"You know who I am, and what I've done."

"You killed Jared Bannan?" Doyle asked.

"I did the world a favor with that one. I only wanted another month or so. Less, as it turned out. He was gonna wreck the little time Jeanie had left just to squeeze a few more dollars out of the deal. If anybody ever had it comin', that sonofabitch did."

"Was Bannan's wife a part of it?"

"Part of what?" Reiser asked, glancing absently at the fire, gauging its progress.

"Did she know you were going to kill her husband?" Doyle pressed.

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"She phoned me, warned me he was going to blow my cover. Tell her I said thanks."

"You can tell her yourself."

"No," Reiser said. "It's too late for that. Fire's about done. Let's get to the rest of it."

"Please don't do anything crazy, Mr. Reiser," Zina pleaded quietly. "Do you think your daughter would want this?"

"All Jeanie ever asked for was an early Christmas. She didn't even get that. Maybe it's an early Christmas where she is now. Hell, maybe it's Christmas every damn day. We'll see."

Zina and Doyle exchanged a lightning glance, reading the vacancy in Reiser's eyes. Knowing what it meant.

"Hold on, Mr. Reiser," Zee said, drawing her automatic. "Please, don't do this."

"Funny, that's what Bannan said. Don't. Please. Something like that. It didn't work for him, either." Reiser jacked a shell into the chamber of his rifle. "It's on you two now, lady. You can send me over. Or come along for the ride."

And he raised the rifle.

Doyle fired first, spinning Reiser halfway around, then all three of them were desperately exchanging fire as the boatyard blazed madly in the background, flames and smoke coiling upward, smothering the stars of the winter night. A funeral pyre worthy of a princess.

"Do you think he was really trying to kill us?" Zina asked, fingering the rip in the shoulder of her black nylon POLICE jacket, the only damage from the fatal shootout.

"I don't think he cared. He sure as hell didn't leave us any choice." They were in the car, roaring back through town with lights and sirens. Leaving the smoldering boatyard to the firemen and the crime-scene team. And the coroner.

"What's your hurry?" Though she already knew.

"Like the man said, it's time to settle up. Any problem with that?"

"Nope. I told the doc if anyone else died, we'd be along."

"All right then."

It was past midnight when they skidded into Lauren Bannan's driveway. Doyle left the strobes flashing. Wanting the neighbors to know. He hammered on the door. No answer.

"I'm out here," Lauren called.

They circled the house to the rear deck. Lauren was standing by the rail, in black slacks and a turtleneck, looking out over the lake. Slivers of early ice floating ghostly in the dark waters, as far as the eye could see.

"Reiser's dead," Doyle said bluntly. "His daughter too."

Lauren nodded, absorbing it, showing nothing. "Did Jeanie go easily?"

"I . . . suppose so," he said, surprised by the question. "She died in her chair, on the dock."

"That's good. It can be far worse, with cancer. What's the rest of it?"

"Emil Reiser killed your husband, Dr. Bannan. He admitted it. Before we had to kill him."

"I'm sorry it came to that."

"It didn't have to! You could have stopped it! Warned us. The way you warned

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him. You knew what he'd do."

"No. I didn't know that. Not then."

"But you damn sure knew after the fact! And you still didn't tell us."

"I couldn't."

"Because of some damned regulation?"

"No. Not because of the law. I would have broken it. But my obligation wasn't to you, Sergeant, or even to my husband."

"Triage," Zina said quietly, getting it. "You told me the first day. It was too late to save your husband. Or Reiser. You were protecting the child."

"Jeanie's mother is a hopeless alcoholic, drowning in self-pity, with a violent boyfriend. If I'd warned you about her father, it would have destroyed the little time Jeanie had left. She was already dealing with so much, I simply couldn't do that to her."

"But you knew Reiser was a murderer!" Doyle raged.

"Actually, I didn't, but it wouldn't have mattered. You saw them together. She worshiped him. And he treated her like . . ."

"A princess," Zina finished.

"What?" Doyle said, whirling on her. "You can't be buying this crock?"

Zina didn't answer. Didn't have to.

"Are you going to arrest me?" Lauren asked.

Doyle eyed his partner, then Lauren, then back again.

"It's your call," Zina said.

"No," he said slowly. "Not tonight, anyway. But you're not clear of this, lady. You'll be answering a lot more questions before it's done."

"I'm terribly sorry about what happened, Sergeant. I hope you can believe that."

"I don't know what I believe," Doyle said, releasing a ragged breath. "Let's go, Zee."

In the car, he sat behind the wheel without starting it, staring into the snowy darkness.

"I know what's bugging you," Zina said quietly.

"What's that?"

"It's a helluva coincidence. That warning Reiser, for the sake of his daughter, just happened to make the doc a very rich woman."

"You think she's capable of that?"

"I know she's awfully bright, Doyle. She has the degrees to prove it. So it's at least possible. But given her choices? I don't know what I would have done."

"Nor do I," he admitted. "I just wish . . ."

"What?"

"I wish that kid had gotten her early Christmas, that's all."

"Hell, maybe she did," Zee said. "Maybe her father was right. Where she is now, it's Christmas every day. Start the damn car, Doyle, before we freeze to death."

Doyle nodded, firing up the Ford, dropping it into gear. But as he pulled out, he realized Zina was still eyeing him. Smiling. "What?"

"My grandfather Gesh once told me he'd killed many a deer with one perfect shot," she said. "Right through the heart. But sometimes a buck will keep on running, a hundred yards or more. He doesn't realize he's been hit, you see. Right through the heart."

"I don't follow you," Doyle said.

"I know," Zina grinned, shaking her head. "I'm just sayin'." ●

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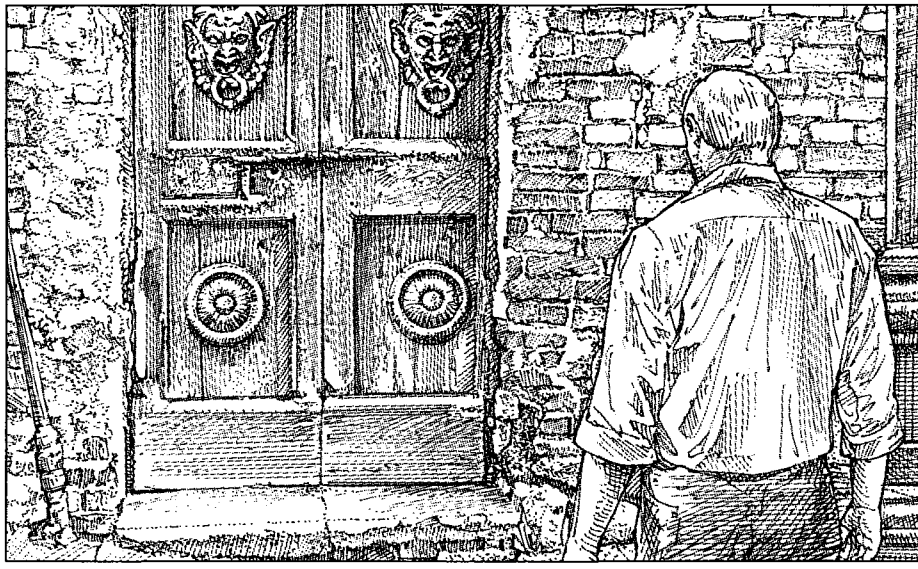

Art by Allen Davis

The Lover and Lever Society

by Robert Barnard

The new (and most unlikely) literary society finally came into existence in one of the buildings of Pisa University, hardly more than a hop, skip, and jump from the world-renowned *torre pendente.* The hall where the delegates to the "Lover and Lever Conference" gathered was more than large enough to accommodate those who were interested in the two Irish writers being honoured, but the specialness of their enthusiasm more than made up for the relative sparseness of their numbers. By 10:30 officers for the new society had been elected, and over coffee the delegates got to know each other. The Irish delegates had to apologise that interest in these two admittedly Anglo-Irish writers was not greater, but the Englishness of their take on Ireland was controversial. There was a strong undertow of Italian interest (this was the country in which Lever spent his last years), and the rest of Europe had provided most of the other delegates, mostly Ph.D. students, with one jet-lagged customer from Australia.

By lunchtime there had been the election (actually nomination and election by acclamation) of a secretary and a treasurer, and in addition, two lectures had been given. It was over lunch, in fact, that things began—not to go wrong,

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no no!—but to acquire an edge. When they reached the fifth and last course, the prime mover in the conference, a man called Terry Butterfield whose bloodhound good looks had over the years set hearts of all sexes aquiver, rose to give the speech of welcome.

"It is a great pleasure," he began, "to welcome to Pisa all those lovers of Irish literature who believe that much more needs to be done to celebrate the impressive body of work of two unjustly neglected literary figures, Samuel Lover and Charles Lever. Here I would pay particular tribute to Professor Mario Pollini, of the English Department here in Pisa, without whose sterling work this two-day conference—really almost a festival—could never have taken place. Also Professor Jim Northcote, newly retired from his august position at London University, and Brian Bracewell, the well-known writer of . . . the well-known writer."

He paused.

"We also owe a great debt to Declan Donnelly, my friendly rival in matters bibliographical, for his custodianship of the financial side of this wonderful coming-together of Lever-lovers and Lover-lovers."

Smiles all round, rather self-satisfied. It was a joke they had seen coming since the day they registered. One or two in the audience thought that in the references to Declan Donnelly they had heard the sound of gritted teeth.

"Does it sound like friendly rivalry to you, mate?" asked the delegate from Australia, any trace of Irish in his accent being subsumed into the cockney tones which are the Australian language.

"No," said Brian Bracewell, on the other side of the table. "But why rivalry? Does Lever fetch astronomical prices? It seems unlikely. And Lover didn't write all that much fiction."

"I should say it's a question of numbers, mate. Lever went on writing long after anybody much wanted to read him. Scarcity value, that's what it'll be. There's not much logic in the secondhand trade, apart from that. Some subject is taken up, or some writer, often following a television series, and suddenly all the books on Vermeer, or Franz-Joseph of Austria, or Ned Kelly, are fetching sky-high prices. It's a mad world, and I've always kept well out of it."

Terry Butterfield was coming to the end of his speech, working up to a bit of eloquence.

"I leave it to others to talk about Samuel Lover. I am a Lever man. Charles Lever spent the later years of his life not in Ireland, not in England, but mainly on the continent of Europe, for most of the last twenty-two years in Italy. He was, in his thoughts and spirit, a European. It may seem that his years here have left little trace. We can see buildings that he knew, but we can see buildings that Attila the Hun knew, and he was around fifteen hundred years before Lever."

As a reader, Robert Barnard has said he prefers the mystery novel to the short story. As a writer of short stories, he excels. His *EQMM* stories have earned him nominations (and wins) for U.S. awards, and in 2006 he won the Crime Writers Association of Britain's Short Story Award for a tale published in the U.K. The competition carried a fifteen-hundred-pound prize. We have more of the author's short tales coming up later this year. Meantime, look for his latest novel, *Last Post* (Scribner '08). ¶

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(Some laughter.) "But if there are only one or two buildings that we know that he lived in, places we know he went to regularly, like the Casino in Bagni di Luca, we are perhaps looking in the wrong place. We should be looking for Italy in his books. And there we find the sun, the love of pleasure, of sheer fun, the realized life which Englishmen find difficult to cope with but which suits Irishmen down to the ground. Instead of looking for traces of Lever in Italy, which are few, we should be looking for traces of Italy in Lever, and they are legion."

He sat down to warm applause.

Sitting opposite him at table was the delegate from Helsinki, a man who had made no impression hitherto except for an unquenchable thirst. Now he leaned across the table and put his mouth close to Terry Butterfield's ear.

"He left something in Italy. There's a descendent lives in Siena."

Terry Butterfield's eyebrows shot up.

"Surely not."

"Quite legit, at least I think so. Descendent of one of his daughters. Name of Teresa Spagnoli. You should have asked her to be here."

"I would have if I'd known," said Butterfield. But he was lying. If she really was a descendent of Charles Lever he would have kept her very quiet from everyone, which meant in particular from his "friendly rival" in matters bibliographical, Declan Donnelly. Their "friendly rivalry" was particularly "friendly" when it came to first editions of *Malcolm Merrivale*—that late Lever novel, published reluctantly by Newby, and given the sort of print run usually only awarded to silly girls from Yorkshire who thought they had written great novels.

Further down the table Declan Donnelly was taking in the little scene that had taken place after the speech's end.

"What the hell's going on up there?" he mused.

"Don't know," said Morag O'Connor, a close friend of Terry's. "But he's interested, Terry is. I know the signs."

"What in the world could that Finn be telling him?"

"Search me. Does it matter? I could ask him."

"*No.* Don't do that. Things always emerge in conversation. I always get to know things if I go about it in the right way."

"Aren't you a judge? I can't imagine many people gossiping with a judge."

"Oh, I'm not the sort of judge who used to enjoy putting on the black cap! People talk to me as if I'm an agony aunt. My current wife says I'm 'the judge next-door.'"

This particular agony aunt, Morag noticed, went in search of agony. When the lunchtime was drawing to a close and groups were breaking up she saw Declan Donnelly, glass in hand, casually wandering up towards the talkative Finn. Or not *towards* him, but taking a path that, with the odd stop and detour, would land him next to the rather unsteady university lecturer.

"Declan Donnelly," he said, holding out his hand. "And you must be Jyrki Kaapola. Did I pronounce that right?"

"Not really. Nobody doesh. Why bother? Just call me Jerk."

"All right, Jerk, I will. I've been called worse things than that in my time, by people in the dock."

"Are you a pleeshman?"

"Judge, Jerk. Terry's just been telling me what you told him."

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"Oh yes? This woman—the descendent on the distaff side. Did I say that right?"

"No, but I get the idea. On the female side."

"Thash right. Daughters—more than one. I mean: daughter of a daughter of a daughter."

"Daughters of—?"

"Charles Lever, of course. Lives in Shiena. No distance. She should have been asked to come."

"How do you know about her?"

"Colleague in the English Department in Helsinki. Has a holiday home in Tuscany. Liquor's cheaper here. He'd met her."

"*Her* being?"

Jerk swayed. He looked as if he had only seconds in which he would remain upright. But he put his hand on the table and with practiced skill maintained a vertical stance.

"Name . . . It's gone . . . I had it, but Shpanish shounding. . . . Like an ancestor from . . . di Spagna. That'sh it. Di Spagna.

"Christian name?"

"Oh . . . Matilda, Teresa, or . . . one of those."

"I don't see the connection between the two."

"End with 'a.' Trishyllabic."

Though Declan was about to say practically all Italian women's names ended with an "a," the Finn at last lost out in his battle with gravity and sank with a grunt to the floor. The delegates clustered around him, but not before Judge Donnelly had made a strategic retreat. He did not feel himself compromised in the least by talking to a drunk, but he didn't want Terry Butterfield to see him doing it.

He considered what to do next. He could, of course, take off for Siena at once. He was just one of many delegates, and he had no special duties during the weekend. On the other hand, he was the financial brain behind the weekend and the new society, and he had just been elected treasurer. It would not look good. And judges these days had to be very aware of what would and would not look good.

And the other token in the balance was that Terry Butterfield *was* occupied the whole weekend. He was in overall charge, and down to do this or that pretty much till midnight that night, and till lunchtime on Sunday, when the conference ended. He, Donnelly, could take off midmorning on Sunday without his absence attracting any comment. And he could be in Siena by around lunchtime, or mid-siesta, if they still had them in Siena. Meanwhile, he slipped back to his hotel, secured the Siena telephone directory, and established the existence of a *di Spagna, M*—living in Via Fontegiusta 41. He went to the nearest bookshop and bought himself a road map of Siena.

Meanwhile, Terry Butterfield pursued a similar course. His hotel was a more modest one than the judge's, but it was close to one of the entrances to the Campo Santo, and the famous tower was only a few yards away from its windows. Terry recognized the cheapness as his duty as conference organizer, and his view of the tower as one of the perks of office. The proprietor came up with a telephone directory of Siena and also a very grubby street guide to the town which had obviously been lent to generations of tourists. No one noticed during

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the Sunday lunch that he was itching to get away: Terry had the reputation of a solid bloke, unflappable, with a touch of gravitas. But he was, in fact, on tenterhooks, and the moment he could say his farewells and get away to the station without arousing any thoughts of a quick getaway he did so.

Judge Declan Donnelly stood on the step of Via Fontegiusta 41 and pulled an antique door handle, resulting in a cacophony inside and outside the dwelling. He heard footsteps in the house, and then he was conscious of being observed through the spy-hole in the door.

"Che vuole?"

"My name is Declan Donnelly. Do you speak English?"

"Yes. What you want?"

"I—" It sounded to his ear a bit absurd however he put it—"I want to talk to you about an ancestor of yours who wrote books."

There was a long pause. He was conscious of being observed closely, and was glad he had dressed with the utmost care, and had assumed the facial expression of one of the pillars of the community.

"You come in," said the voice. The door opened and closed behind him, and he followed an ample (but not fat, let alone obese) figure down the ill-lit hallway into a large room furnished with the usual bulky pieces that spoke of plush and respectability. Miss or Mrs. di Spagna was an attractive and lively forty-something, and she spoke the language of the plush of her flat, but less so the language of respectability.

"Who this writer, then?"

Declan sat down where she gestured him to.

"The writer is an Irish novelist called Charles Lever. He wrote in the mid nineteenth century and he lived the last years of his life in Italy. I was hoping—" the hope was fading though—"you had a collection of his novels."

The well-upholstered shoulders shrugged.

"I never 'eard of 'im. Maybe my 'usband."

"Your husband? I heard that the descendent of Charles Lever was a woman."

"Oh, maybe 'is first wife. She died last year. She was a great reader, 'e's a great reader, they 'ave a fine library. I lock it up. I don't give 'im time to *read.* I didn't marry 'im for *books*."

She gave him a meaningful glance, a slight smile, then looked away.

"And your husband—can I talk to him?"

"No. 'E is away. Three 'ole weeks. Can you imagine? It is so lonely."

"It must be. And you not long married."

"*Esattamente!* You are good-looking man. Well-dressed, smooth, a touch James Bond. Experienced, eh?"

"I have been married more often than was perhaps wise. People assume that you are fickle, like a bee flitting from flower to flower."

"What is that—a bee?"

"Bzzzz," said Declan. "They think you want variety."

"And you?"

"I want variety."

"Then what say we 'ave a little bargain. A deal you call it, no? You come to bed with me for an hour or two. That is a pleasure for both of us. And I give you the key to my 'usband's library. 'Is and 'is first wife's, the book people."

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Declan was sorely tempted. His devotion to his habitual parade of a respectable façade never applied once he was behind closed doors. None of his wives had been in any doubt as to what he did when exposed to sexual temptation. He did what Oscar Wilde recommended.

"Done," he said.

When he banged on the peeling door of the small, ancient house in Via Dante, Terry had no idea what to expect. The steps to the door were so faint that he could hardly hear them. Or the voice, either.

"Si—chi è?"

"Signora Spagnoli? I am English. Do you speak English?"

"Yes, a little. What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you on important business."

There was a pause. Then he was shocked to hear the chains on the door being taken down—just what he had always advised his mother never to do. It's a good job it's just me, he thought. The door was pulled open with difficulty.

"Well, come in," said the tiny lady, all skin and bone, wrapped up against the cold that did not exist. She closed the door as he came in, and led the way through the unlighted hall to a high-ceilinged room, once rather grand, but now dirty, peeling, without pictures, almost without furniture—nothing more than two chairs and a cupboard. She led him to one chair and sat down herself in the other.

"It's very good of you to see me," said Terry. "But you really shouldn't—"

"Open the door. So people tell me. But why not? If it was someone who wanted to batter me and rob me, wouldn't he see at once there was nothing to be gained? And if he did assault me and leave me to die, what would I be losing? A few months of a life that is no longer worth living. As I'm sure you can see, and guess, all is gone, little by little. To the man who gives little bits of money for nice things. Now there are no nice things, and no money. That is why I do not offer you even a cup of coffee."

Terry was struck by the precise, almost literary English she spoke.

"You have excellent English," he said.

"Oh, it was Miss Cavendish, who helped in the shop. A very precise and prim person. She came to live in Italy because of her admiration for Mussolini—one I did not understand or share. After the war she had nothing except her beautiful voice and her precise and grammatical English. Some of the English tourists thought she was funny, but luckily Siena does not attract many of that type."

"You had a shop. What was it? A bookshop?"

"Oh dear, no. Leather goods, just off the Piazza del Duomo. Lovely soft gloves, elegant handbags, evening shoes. All beautiful and expensive. But when my husband died—" She gestured with her hand, downwards. Terry nodded.

"Your name was given to me as a possible descendent of an English—well, Irish—novelist called Charles Lever." He saw no response in her eyes. "He was fairly well known in his time—the Victorian era."

"I have never heard of him. I have seen Charles Dickens on television and Jane Austen. Oh, I like Jane Austen *very* much. But the television broke down and could not be repaired, and of course I could not afford. . . . The Bible says we take nothing out of this world. I shall soon have nothing even though I am still in it."

"So you have never heard of Lever?"

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"Never in my life. I know my grandfathers and my great-grandfathers. I assure you there were no English novelists among them. One fought for a time in Garibaldi's red-shirted army, but that is as near to fame as we have ever got."

"And your husband? You never heard him talk of a writer in his family tree?"

She laughed, almost merrily.

"Never! Not a chance of it. My Aldo, he fought the Germans all the way up Italy, and was wounded in Pisa. Perhaps one day those brave Italians will be as famous as Garibaldi's men. But he and his family were shopkeepers, men of commerce. There was not a literary person among them."

"So you have no copy of *Malcolm Merrivale,* no first edition?"

"No, alas. I have never heard of it, yet it must be famous for you to come all this way in search of it."

"Not famous at all. Almost unknown, even to specialists in Irish literature. But we collectors—we must have our holding complete: a first of every title." He saw incomprehension in her gaze. "I am wasting your time."

"What else can I do with my time but waste it?"

Terry stood up and fumbled in the back pocket of his jeans.

"I must pay you for it nevertheless," he added hurriedly, in case she was insulted: "Please regard this like any other commercial transaction, like selling a pair of gloves."

But she was not insulted, and sat fingering and looking at the note.

"Oh, it's the new stuff. So shoddy-looking. . . ."

"But much the best stuff for buying things: food, coffee, medicines."

"Oh, I know *that*. But the old stuff was so much more like real money, and the price looked so good on a pair of gloves in the window—so many lovely noughts in it, you felt like a millionaire if you sold anything."

Terry escaped from the room, feeling as if he had escaped from a very classy sort of madhouse.

Declan Donnelly got out of bed, after two eventful hours. Every part of him seemed exhausted, and his legs seemed to have gone off on a separate existence. He pulled on his trousers and then put on his shirt, buttoning down the front in the wrong buttonholes. He tried to tie his tie, failed, and threw it down on the floor in disgust. He grabbed his coat and pulled it on. He was aware of a movement from the bed.

"You want to see the library?"

"Delightful and exciting though the last few hours have been," he said in his suavest voice, "the library was part of our deal, as I'm sure you remember."

"It is very good. You like," said Signora di Spagna, jumping to the floor and leading him from the bedroom. They went back to the sitting room, the signora fetching a key from the mantelpiece and throwing open a door in the corner of the room and switching on a light.

Declan found himself looking into something between a large cupboard and a small room. It was packed with books, almost all paperbacks. The first title that met Declan's eye was *Kane and Abel.* Then he saw a whole shelf-ful of Wilbur Smith. Then *Riders,* Joanna Trollope, Andy McNab. Another shelf-ful, this time of Barbara Cartland. *Gaudy Night,* which Declan had often thought the dullest book he had ever read. *Goldfinger* and *Casino Royale.* Several James Hiltons and *The Blue Lagoon.*

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Declan Donnelly turned to his hostess.

"I ought to recommend you to take up reading," he said. "There is a lifetime of experience awaiting you here. However, I am loath to direct you away from the activity which clearly you do best."

And he turned tail and fled the flat.

There were many small bars between the Via Dante and the railway station. Terry went into several of them, and began to lose sight of which direction the railway station lay in. It was as he was coming out of the bar in the Via Rossi that he saw a familiar face.

"Scellerato! Ladro! Traditore!"

"Nothing of the sort," said Declan, putting out a hand to steady Terry's wavering body (though the hand itself shook). "Perfectly normal behaviour between competing collectors."

"I saw you talking to that bloody Finn."

"Why shouldn't I talk to a Finn? Particularly one with information for a Leverite."

"Ha! Information! Well, I can save you a bit of time if you're on your way to talk to Signora Spagnoli."

"To who? Never heard of her. I've been talking to Signora di Spagna. I can save *you* a bit of time if you're on your way to talk to her."

"I'm not." They looked at each other. "That bloody Finn," said Terry. "He couldn't even remember her name, he was so drunk."

"Finns are always drunk," said Declan. "I wouldn't mind betting there's no descendent of Lever here, legit or illegit. . . . Here's a bar. Have another drink. Then we'll get a taxi and take the last train home."

So they had a last drink, swore eternal friendship, swore the finding of a first edition of *Malcolm Merrivale* was a game not worth the candle, and they'd give it up pronto. Then they went back out into the street, hailed lots of taxis, none of whose drivers wanted to pick up two drunken Brits (for they were both, in their different ways, respectable and casual, very recognisable) then began to make their way on foot to the station.

By chance, as they made their way like silent-film drunks, they walked along Via d'Orti, where at number forty-six, in a neat little upstairs flat, Valentina della Spanna was eating from a large box of chocolates, drinking from a bottle of finer wine than she had drunk for years, and contemplating a small gap in the dusty books on a high shelf in a dim part of the room—books written by some old geezer who somehow or other was connected with her, and which the slightly tipsy man from a country she had barely heard of had bought from her for a price (for he was a fair-minded man, this Finn, drunk or sober) which was a bargain for him and a prodigious windfall for her. He was a nice man, she thought, as she took another soft centre. And he had a lovely sense of humour. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: It should be emphasized that there is no resemblance in the characters or events in this story to the characters or events at the International Conference on Charles Lever in Pisa in September 2006, which the author attended.

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The Christmas Egg

by Edward D. Hoch

Simon Ark was the first of Edward D. Hoch's series characters, appearing in his first published story in 1955. In those early cases, Ark was presented as a Coptic priest who'd been on the scene, so to speak, for two millennia. Much less was made of the occult aspects of the Ark character when his cases started appearing in *EQMM* in the 1970s. The following is the final Ark story completed by the great short story writer; it was originally a small-print-run holiday gift pamphlet for customers of Crippen & Landru Publishers.

It had been many months since I'd seen Simon Ark. With Christmas approaching, my wife Shelly was in such a mellow mood that she suggested we invite him for dinner over the holidays. "I never thought I'd hear that from you," I told her.

"I only object when he drags you halfway around the world on one of his excursions," she answered, busy opening the day's Christmas cards at her desk. "I'll admit he always has interesting stories to tell."

That he did, and I happened to know he was in New York at the moment, attracted by an exhibit of newly discovered treasures from an Egyptian tomb. Simon liked to claim he'd once been a Coptic priest, and all things Egyptian held a special fascination for him.

So at Shelly's urging I phoned him at the 14th Street address where he often stayed when in the city. It was a former convent converted to a sort of bed-and-breakfast and there was something about the serenity of the place that appealed to him. "Christmas day for dinner," I told him after we'd conversed a bit. "Shelly insists you must come."

"It would be a pleasure to see you both," he admitted. "It's been a long time."

"I'll meet the two o'clock train."

We were in Westchester, just a short distance from the city, and Simon surprised me by appearing with a bottle of wine. "The liquor store closed for Christmas," he explained, "so I borrowed this from the convent's chapel."

"Stealing sacramental wine, Simon?"

When he smiled, his aging face crinkled into a pattern of well-worn wrinkles. "Don't tell Shelly. I'll replace it in the morning. They only keep it for rare occasions when a priest stays overnight and wishes to celebrate Mass."

Shelly greeted him graciously and accepted the wine with some surprise. "How nice of you, Simon. Let me take your coat."

We settled down around the Christmas tree while Shelly served cocktails before dinner. We have no children and our Christmas visitors consisted mainly of a few neighbors and friends. This year even Shelly's sister from the West Coast hadn't been well enough to make the trip east. Still, the tree was a long-

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standing tradition and we stuck with it.

"I haven't seen you in months," I said. "What have you been doing lately?"

"Nothing really startling," he replied after a moment's thought. "But I was hired to solve a crime two days ago. I have to fly out to Pittsburgh tomorrow."

"The day after Christmas?"

"I know. It reminds me of the old days, when for a brief period I took such assignments the way a private detective might."

"Who hired you, Simon?" Shelly asked with a smile. "Was it a wandering-daughter job?"

He grinned a bit at her teasing and I was pleased to see them getting along so well. "No, but I suppose you might call it a wandering-egg job."

"Egg?"

"Egg. I've been hired by Barker & Brothers, the Northeast's largest egg supplier to supermarkets and restaurants. Their headquarters is in a building just outside of Pittsburgh. And what better way to celebrate the firm's fiftieth anniversary than with a contest with a golden egg as first prize? There are eggs for Easter, why not an egg for Christmas, to celebrate the birth of Christ?"

"Made of real gold?" I asked. I remembered a small item in the paper earlier in the week but hadn't paid much attention to it.

Simon nodded, accepting a second cocktail from Shelly. "Solid gold and weighing about three pounds, larger than an ordinary chicken's egg. Its value was immensely increased by an inset of small diamonds forming the company's logo, B & B, which is imprinted on all its eggs. They placed it on display in a locked glass case in the building's entrance lobby. The lobby is kept lighted all night, with an alarm system and a television monitor."

"And what happened to the golden egg?"

"It disappeared Friday morning and then reappeared under very strange circumstances. That's when Barker & Brothers called on me."

"Barker or the Brothers?" Shelly asked, making conversation as she finished her drink and herded us toward the dining-room table.

"Barker. Lenore Barker, to be exact. She's the eldest child and inherited majority control of the business after her parents died. Her brothers Pete and Wayne became just that—Brothers. But she's in charge. In this instance you might say she was quite literally the keeper of the key. She's unmarried and has an apartment right in the Barker building. There was only one key to the display case containing the golden egg, and she wore it on a chain around her neck. She even slept with it on."

"Her brothers resented her position and one of them stole the egg," Shelly suggested, seating us and starting to serve her fancy holiday salad.

"That seemed likely," Simon admitted, "but they weren't the only suspects. An animal-rights group claimed Barker & Brothers was mistreating the chickens on its egg farms. The group's leader, a woman named Melissa Frank, had led a midnight raid on one farm and promised others. When the golden egg vanished from its nesting display case, she announced that she'd been granted supernatural powers to free the egg from the greedy control of Barker & Brothers."

Shelly passed around pepper for the salad. "Certainly no one believed that!"

"Not at first, but then she called a local television reporter and allowed him to film a video of her holding the egg, As you might imagine, Lenore Barker was furious. The police simply shrugged. The egg was no longer missing. Melissa Frank had it and was arranging to return it to its rightful owner. They consid-

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ered the entire matter to be some sort of publicity stunt. That's when Lenore Barker contacted me. She called Melissa an eco-terrorist and wanted me to explain how she stole the egg."

I munched away at my salad, trying not to speak with my mouth full. Shelly had produced a bottle of Cabernet and was filling our glasses. "We're having roast beef, Simon," she announced. "I hope that's satisfactory."

He smiled again. "I was expecting a Christmas goose."

"Not in this house, you weren't! Go on with your story."

"The facts in the case are relatively simple. The large golden egg was placed on a pile of straw by Lenore Barker herself, while the TV cameras recorded it. Then the lid of the display case was closed and locked. Outside the building, Melissa Frank and her people were picketing from time to time. On Friday morning the golden egg was gone from the display case."

Shelly cleared away the salad plates. "Can I ask what Lenore and her brothers planned to do with that egg?"

"It was to be part of a massive television advertising campaign. The gold-and-jeweled egg would break open, thanks to animation, and spew out the rules of a contest marking the company's anniversary, with the egg as first prize. While the egg itself was insured, its theft by Melissa Frank effectively canceled the anniversary contest and cost the company in both money and prestige."

I passed the wine bottle to Simon while Shelly served the roast beef and potatoes. "You're spoiling me," he told her.

"Go on with your story."

"There's really no more to tell at the moment. I'm flying out tomorrow to view the scene first-hand." He turned to me. "Would you like to come along?"

I took a bite of beef and glanced across the table at Shelly. "What do you think?"

"We've got a New Year's Eve party on Sunday."

"Tomorrow's just Tuesday. I'd be home long before Sunday."

She was silent for a time while we enjoyed our meal. Finally as she picked up the plates and served us blueberry pie with coffee, she sighed and said, "Go! Just make sure you're back in time."

Pittsburgh on the morning after Christmas was cold and bleak, with patches of dirty snow the only reminder of how close the city'd come to having a white Christmas. I suspected I'd been invited along not just for companionship but to serve as driver of a rental car, but my suspicion was groundless. A bulky young man in a black topcoat was waiting for us, holding up a sign that said simply "Ark."

"Simon Ark?" he asked as we approached him. "I'm Wayne Barker. My sister sent me to meet your plane."

Simon introduced me and we followed him out to a waiting limousine. Barker & Brothers' egg empire was about ten miles north of the city, near the Fox Chapel area. It was an impressive building with an oval driveway leading to the main entrance. "This is the place," Wayne explained as we entered the reception area. A darkened display case stood forlornly awaiting viewers, holding only a bedding of straw at the moment. "I'll leave it to my sister to fill in the details. She likes to be in charge."

We took the elevator to the top floor of the eight-story building. Lenore Barker's spacious office shared the space with her living quarters. She was a hard-looking woman with jet-black hair and piercing dark eyes that seemed to

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zero in on you when she spoke. "You're Ark," she said, standing to greet us and extending a hand. "I was expecting a younger man."

"I've had more experience than the younger ones," he told her with the hint of a smile.

"This is your what?" she asked, indicating me. "Your bodyguard, chauffeur, Watson?"

"All of that," I told her. "And his editor, too, before I retired from Neptune Books."

"Well, if he can help you solve this theft, I'll be indebted to him, Mr. Ark. I told you the bare facts on the phone last Friday."

"Perhaps you should go over them again in greater detail," he suggested.

"I believe the golden egg was Wayne's idea, to celebrate our anniversary, and my other brother, Pete, suggested adding the diamonds to enhance its value." She turned to Wayne. "Pete should be here, too. Ring him on your cell."

"I understand there were protesters out front," Simon remarked. "We saw none when we drove up."

"They're still celebrating Christmas. They'll be back."

"It doesn't look like you had much snow for the holiday," I said.

"It came last week and melted away."

Wayne Barker had managed to reach his brother by cell phone and a few moments later Pete appeared. He seemed a few years younger than Wayne, with curly blond hair and a frat boy's self-assurance. "What's up, Sis?" he asked, ignoring Simon and me.

Lenore gave him a look bordering on contempt. "This is Simon Ark and his companion. I've hired him to investigate our stolen egg."

"It's not stolen anymore. That babe Melissa has it."

"And how did she get it?" Lenore wanted to know. Neither of her brothers had an answer for that.

"You said there was an alarm system and a security camera," Simon reminded her. "Tell me more about them."

It was Wayne who answered. "The alarm goes off if the glass is broken or if anyone tries to force the lock without a key. There's also a security camera like they have in banks. It takes a still photograph of the egg every fifteen seconds."

"And the key?"

"There is only one," Lenore told us. "I wore it all the time, even when I slept. It's one of those fancy new security jobs that can't be copied. I had the new display case and lock installed a few weeks ago so we could put the anniversary egg on display for the holidays. Pete still has the key from when he opened the case."

"I saw no damage to the display case," Simon noted.

"There was no damage," she replied. "And the key never left my neck."

"Tell me the whole thing."

"The golden egg went on display a week before Christmas. We had lots of press coverage, even though Melissa and her gang of eco-terrorists were picketing out front. Everything was fine at first. We averaged around eight hundred people a day coming in to look at the egg, and our ad campaign for the contest was all set to roll. Then, early Friday morning—"

Pete Barker took up the story. "Lenore lives here in her apartment. My brother is married and lives at home, but there's a spare apartment I sometimes use."

"To entertain his lady friends," Lenore scoffed. "The security camera is hooked up to televisions in his apartment and mine, so we could check on the golden egg

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day or night."

"It sounds as if you work all the time," I remarked.

Lenore Barker smiled. "I figure the chickens work 24/7, so I work 24/7."

"And what happened Friday morning?" Simon asked.

Pete took up the story again. "I always wake up early, just after six. I turned on the TV to look at the egg and it was gone. The straw seemed untouched, but there was no egg visible. I ran upstairs to my sister's apartment and rang the bell until I woke her up."

Lenore nodded. "I went to the door in my nightgown, still half asleep, and he told me to turn on the closed-circuit channel. The golden egg was gone! I think I screamed when I saw that. He said maybe it rolled under the straw, so I gave him the key to check it out while I dressed."

"I'd like to see that security tape," Simon told her.

"Certainly. I have it right here. The camera took a new shot every fifteen seconds. This is the segment where the egg disappeared." She slid a tape into the VCR and turned on the monitor.

There was the golden egg with its diamond initials, glistening in the spotlight. By looking closely I could just make out the time and date at the top of each photo. Dec 22 01:15:00 A.M. She skipped ahead until the time was 06:01:45 A.M. "See? It's still there at 6:03, but it's gone in the next photo, taken fifteen seconds later."

"And the alarm wasn't sounded?"

She shook her head. "We had no knowledge of it until Pete happened to turn on the closed-circuit channel about ten minutes later."

Simon turned to the younger brother. "What did you find when you checked the case?"

"Everything was perfectly normal. The lock hadn't been tampered with and the alarm hadn't gone off. But the golden egg was gone. I unlocked the case and felt around in the straw, just to make sure." Lenore advanced the tape some more and we saw his hand reaching into the straw.

"No egg," she commented. "What happened to it?"

Simon Ark frowned at the monitor. "Do you still have the key?"

Pete Barker dug into his pocket. "It's here someplace." He pulled out the key on its chain along with some coins, a little silver dog, and a cell phone. "The dog's because my name is Barker. Someone's idea of a joke."

Simon examined the thick tubular key. "No way of copying this," he agreed, handing it to Lenore. "Tell me about this woman, Melissa Frank."

"She's an eco-terrorist," Lenore said, reverting to her favorite description. "She's been picketing the building off and on ever since we had her arrested for trespassing on one of our egg farms. The golden egg disappeared on Friday morning, and later that day she called a TV station to give an interview. She announced that she had the egg, and had magically freed it from our captivity just as she tried to free the chickens at our farm."

"Did she actually show the egg?"

"Only a brief glimpse on television. I'd have to examine it to know if it's the real thing. She wants me to appear with her on live TV to accept the egg. I'm trying to have her arrested, but the police say if she returns the egg there's no crime—and if there was, I can't show how it was done."

"When is this meeting to take place?"

"Tomorrow morning on their local news hour."

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Simon nodded. "Perhaps I can speak with Miss Frank before then and try to get to the bottom of this affair."

That evening we went in search of Melissa Frank, the woman with the magical powers. They knew her around town and she wasn't hard to find, but she was something of a surprise, at least to me. Seated in a booth at the Three Rivers Lounge with a blond young man, she looked like a typical college girl wearing jeans and a white turtleneck against the December wind. Somehow I'd imagined her all in black, with black lipstick to complete the Goth look.

"You're Simon Ark?" she asked me.

"No, he is."

She shifted her gaze to Simon, perhaps surprised that he seemed so old. "You're Lenore Barker's consultant?"

"Correct. I'm here to resolve this dispute between you two. May we join you?"

"Sure! This is Angel, one of our group. He's the one who actually stole the egg."

Simon slid into the booth opposite them. "How did you do it?" he asked the young man.

"Easy," Angel replied with a grin. I realized now that he was Latin, and the hair was bleached. "But my method is secret. We may want to use it again."

"You're ready to return the egg to Lenore Barker?"

"Certainly," Melissa told us. "We only want the publicity, not the egg."

Which was, I knew, exactly what Barker & Brothers didn't want. Simon spread his hands on the table. "Suppose I suggest a deal. If I can determine how the egg was stolen, before TV time tomorrow morning, you'll return it without publicity."

Angel and Melissa exchanged glances. "Sure," she said with a slight smile. "That's fair enough. Can I buy you two a drink to seal the deal?"

"A handshake will suffice," Simon assured her, reaching out to grasp the hand she offered, unadorned except for an animal-charm bracelet around her wrist.

"The TV interview is set for eight-fifteen. The Pittsburgh station is sending a crew out here to do it right in front of the Barker building, weather permitting."

"We'll be here at eight," Simon told her. He nodded toward Angel as he slid out of the booth.

Outside, I took a deep breath of the December air and said, "You certainly talk a good game, Simon. They never would have agreed to that except that they know you're bluffing."

"Of course I'm bluffing, my friend, but only for the moment. Once they admitted the theft was a trick and not mere magic, I was certain I could reason it out."

"By eight tomorrow morning?"

"We shall give it a try. Let us return now to the Barker building and exercise our powers of reasoning."

He reported back to Lenore Barker, who was waiting nervously for our return. Her brother Wayne lounged on the sofa with a beer in one hand and a cell phone to his ear, while Pete tapped out something on his laptop computer. I felt as if we were checking in with a political candidate or a touring rock star.

"A friend of Miss Frank's, known as Angel, has admitted stealing the egg but won't say how he accomplished it," Simon told them. "They are willing to return the golden egg to you tomorrow morning in front of the local television cameras, at eight-fifteen."

Lenore made no effort to hide her anger. "I'd rather lose the egg than give that

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bitch one minute of publicity!"

"You don't mean that," Wayne said, snapping shut his cell phone. "We'd have to junk our whole ad campaign for the contest. And we couldn't collect insurance on the egg if she was willing to give it back."

"I suggested a way to resolve this," Simon went on. "If I can explain how the egg was stolen by eight o'clock tomorrow morning, she'll return it without a press conference."

"Can you do it?"

Simon sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs. I could see him settling in, so I sat down too. Wayne got up and brought us a couple of beers. "The problem of your Christmas egg is no different from a standard locked-room mystery. There are only three time frames during which the egg could have been stolen—before it was placed in your locked display case, while it was in the case, or after the case was opened."

"All are impossible," Lenore insisted.

Ignoring her, Simon pressed on. "Since you placed the golden egg in the case yourself, if it was stolen before that, you had to take it yourself, substituting a fake of some sort that would dissolve under the hot lights."

"That's preposterous!" she objected.

"Of course it is. If the egg started to dissolve, it would have been obvious on the security camera. And you had no possible motive for stealing your own egg. You wouldn't have done it for publicity, since any publicity it garnered would have been bad for your company and the contest." Simon paused and took a sip of his beer. "We come next to a theft while the egg was locked in its case. Once again, only you could have done it. By your own account, the only key to the case, a one-of-a-kind key, was worn around your neck at all times, even when you slept. Once again, you had no motive for stealing the egg yourself. Could you have been drugged or hypnotized or walked in your sleep? No, no, and no, because we learn from the security-camera pictures that the egg vanished only moments before Pete awakened you to report its loss."

"So where does that leave us?" she asked.

"Could the egg have been stolen after the case was unlocked?"

"Of course not! It was already gone before I gave Pete the key."

Simon Ark smiled. "And there we come to the crux of the problem. The only magic involved in the theft of your golden egg was technological, not supernatural. By eliminating all other possibilities, the only time the egg could have been stolen was after the case was unlocked."

Pete Barker was on his feet. "You're crazy! How could this Angel character have stolen it then? I was the one with the key."

"Ah, the unreliable confession! It was not Angel but you who took the egg when you unlocked the case. What your sister saw on the TV monitor in her apartment was a photo taken by the security camera just before the egg was placed there days earlier. You scanned that frame into your computer and then downloaded it onto the video feed, overriding the live signal from the security camera. The time and date at the top of the picture were so small as to be virtually unreadable, especially when her attention was distracted by the missing egg."

Lenore was listening to it all with rapt attention. Now she interrupted to ask, "Then what did he do?"

"Those cameras have a little red light that comes on when the picture is

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snapped, so Pete had fifteen seconds to unlock the case, steal the egg and lock it again before the next photo. He waited a few minutes and then let his hand be photographed feeling around the straw. He used his computer to pull the earlier photo off the override and the live shots returned to the monitor. When the tape was viewed later, only the live shots with their times appeared."

She was livid now. "Are you telling me that my own brother is in league with that—that eco-terrorist? You'll have to prove that to me."

"I'll let you prove it to yourself," Simon told her. "In his pocket your brother Pete carries a little silver image of a dog. He said a friend gave it to him because his name is Barker. Tomorrow morning when you meet with Melissa Frank look at the animal-charm bracelet that she wears. I'm willing to bet the dog charm is missing."

That was pretty much the end of it. Lenore met with Melissa Frank the following morning in private, out of range of the TV cameras. She complimented the woman on her charm bracelet and then told her that Pete had confessed everything after Simon's accusation. Melissa returned the golden egg as she'd agreed to do, and Lenore, in a gesture to the holiday season, promised that Barker & Brothers would be making a donation to Melissa's wildlife organization.

"A happy ending for everyone," I told Shelly when I returned home. "No one got killed and Lenore is even willing to forgive her brother."

But this brought only a snort from Shelly. "I told you from the beginning that the brothers resented her position and one of them stole the egg. If you and Simon would listen to me, you'd save yourself all this travel." ●

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BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

While it's not yet January, you're holding the January issue of *EQMM* in your hands. Time, then, to make a New Year's Resolution for 2009: Read more blogs.

A good place to begin might be *Small Crimes* **(http://small-crimesnovel.blogspot.com),** the blog of *EQMM* author Dave Zeltserman, who's also the publisher of the soon-to-be defunct online zine *Hardluck Stories* **(http://www.hardluckstories.com)** and the author of several novels, the latest also titled *Small Crimes*. Zeltserman's blog covers a number of things, but of most interest to readers is probably a continuing series of posts on "Lessons Learned from the Trenches," which focuses on Zeltserman's writing and publishing career. It's worth looking through the entire blog to read these posts about a writer's trials and successes.

Last month I mentioned some sites with Old Time Radio shows. If you're interested in listening to something a good bit different, try Seth Harwood's *Crimewav.com* **(http://crimewav.com),** where you can hear podcasts of writers reading their own stories. The site has a warning that "the content of these podcasts is intended for adults." The stories posted so far, by writers like Gary Phillips, Vicki Hendricks, Jason Starr, and others definitely aren't cozy.

A group blog, *First Offenders* **(http://firstoffenders.typepad.com)** is by "four mystery writers [who] share their journey." Lori G. Armstrong, Jeff Shelby, Alison Gaylin, and Karen E. Olson are the bloggers, and you never know what they might come up with, from "Hot Gossip Week" to interviews with writers like Daniel Judson to presenting guest bloggers like Chris Grabenstein. Or maybe someone will talk about writing erotic romance novels. It's not predictable, but it's fun.

And then there's *Mysterious Matters* **(http://mysteriousmatters.typepad.com)**, a blog by an anonymous male whose intent is "to educate and entertain both writers and readers of mystery and suspense novels with tips, comments, and the inside story of the mystery publishing business." You should read the blog's "Mission Statement" first. After that, you can read the meaty, thoughtful posts on both writing and publishing, including comments on politics in the mystery, backstory, characters, and other topics dear to the hearts of readers and writers. That's it for now: Don't break your resolution!

©2008 by Bill Crider. Visit his blog at http://billcrider.blogspot.com

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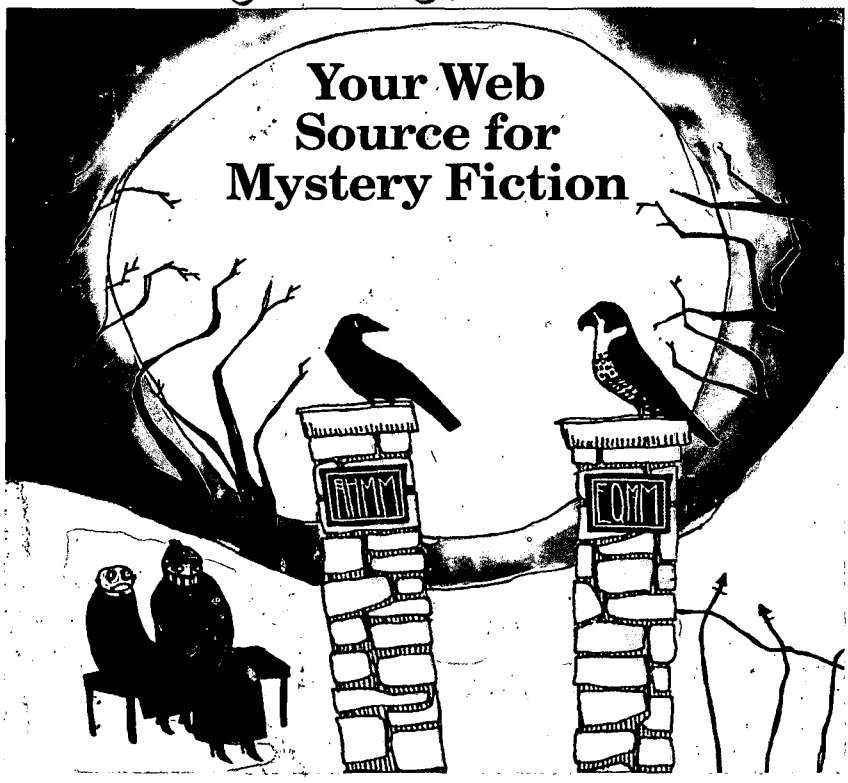

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